

The Education of a Lady

thewanderers'wanderingdaughter

Harry Potter

Complete



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Summary

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Description:

COMPLETE. Fourth and final (for real this time) part in the His Little Bird series. The story of survival, betrayal, and tragedy. A monster took everything from her. Now she's expected to be a willing participant in the world he's built for them. They want her to become one of them. She only wants vengeance, and now that she has her power back, she can make that a reality.

1. The Devil's Bride

A traveler making his way down a lonesome and richly forested road was on the search for a refuge. He had been walking since dawn, hoping that he could make good time and find a place to rest before dinner. He had started off this journey with a horse, and the first day's worth of travel was speedy and pleasant. However, at the end of the first day an unfortunate accident with a slippery cobblestone had rendered the poor beast unfit for more travel. It would take a long time for it to heal, if the injury allowed it, and he was reluctant to waste time. He counted himself lucky it had happened just as he'd come across a small village.

The man had sadly sold his horse to an innkeeper in exchange for a meal and a room for the night, and decided the next morning to continue the rest of the way on foot, preferring to keep the last of his funds than to spend it on a cab or another horse.

He had been homeschooled as a child, and once he had come of age he gone to work as a bricklayer in the Muggle world, following the near-feverish rate of constructions in large cities in North America. The pay was sufficient to keep his modest lifestyle, and he squirreled away enough money to keep his plans for the future open and not too miserable.

He was a man with taste for travel and movement, and so he had no problem walking the rest of the way if need be. The day was a fine one—a little chill in the air from the morning mist still hung heavy and sharp around him, but he wore thick layers that shielded him from their sting. The vegetation and trees around him was so lush that he made a conscious effort to fill his lungs up as best as he could with each breath to savor its freshness. There was a parcel with fresh cheese, meat, bread and fish that the innkeeper had wrapped for him and an old flask of wine tucked safely inside his pack. It would last him through the day but he was eager to see what else he might find to eat at the next village, which was not that far off, if the innkeeper's information was accurate.

He had been sorry to trade in his horse, having only just bought it some days before for his travels along the countryside. Were he not a Squib he would have been able to heal the poor animal and spare himself the ordeal—he'd instantly been faced with that thought as he'd stared at the creature's injured leg. Rather than give in to bitterness and indulge in a sour mood, however, the traveler was eager to make the most of the day. His youngest sister lived in the village he was headed to, and was preparing for her wedding. The gift he had bought her lay safe in a secret compartment in his pack that an old friend had added into it when he was still in school.

The bag was an old, shabby thing, but it had held up well since his school years, and the traveler prized it for the magical addition his neighbor had given it. It had saved him in the past, when he had been robbed and the clueless Muggle thieves could not detect the large pocket that could hold just about anything inside. It was his most precious possession.

The sun was up high and the birds sang loudly. As always, it had been pleasant at first, then annoying, then he had grown almost deaf to the sound, only realizing it when he realized the area had become absolutely silent. He looked around himself, and saw only the lane on his right that led into a denser forest.

It did not make him uneasy. The innkeeper had told him this would happen, after all. Speaking English through a thick French accent, he had told him that the road was haunted at this particular spot. Not like the ghosts that could be seen in old libraries or in Hogwarts itself, if the stories were true, but really haunted. There was a gateway to hell on this road, the innkeeper had insisted. He had seen a malicious spirit there himself the last time he had been there, but when pressed for the exact location, he refused to say.

The traveler saw nothing. The birds had gone silent, to be sure, but so far he felt nothing out of the ordinary. He looked around and there was nothing to suggest there was something other-worldly about the road, but remembering the deceptive appearance of his pack, he decided not to shrug it off entirely. There was always some sort of substance to these types of stories, no matter how small.

The innkeeper had also divulged in a local secret: the Devil's bride, they had come to call her.

Nobody knew her name. Nobody knew where she had come from. Simply one day she was there in their square, dressed in white, not talking to anybody but reading a book by a fountain. Nobody dared approach her. Everybody agreed that she was beautiful, and that just to look at her filled them with sorrow, though they could never tell why.

The traveler had argued that this was no reason for her to have any association with the Devil. She might just be a very private person, or even shy, and being beautiful was probably not something she could help. The innkeeper had smiled knowingly.

'You weel know when you see,' he had said, nodding. *'Elle appartient au diable.'*

The traveler was skeptical, but prepared to believe. He had asked for more stories.

According to the innkeeper, the woman did not come to the village often. When she did, she always came alone. Except once, when she came with a man.

Nobody remembered what he looked like, except that he was beautiful too, and that his eyes, despite appearing to be, were not human. Some of the villagers who had dared to look him in the eye insisted that his mere stare had frozen them like statues, and they were only able to move again when he looked away.

They argued on whether his hair was blonde, brown or black, the shape of his nose. The feature everyone remembered most clearly was the eyes, and everything else seemed a blur. He was tall, they unanimously agreed, for the tallest villager, who was over six feet, had been able to look him clear in the face without stooping. The curious man did not speak to any of them but they overheard him speaking to the woman—his wife. His French was flawless, and though they feared him, it was an odd source of pride, to know that the Devil was a Frenchman.

When they both had appeared the word had spread quickly, and soon everybody knew. The village was small and its populace friendly but eager for gossip. It wasn't uncommon for most of its residents to gather in the late afternoon or early evening to sit around the square and eat or drink and trade their stories.

Nobody had dared to go outside, the day they had both visited. The residents watched from behind their curtains and peepholes as the pair walked around, never entering any businesses

or restaurants. Those who were already outside kept a careful distance. The pair did not seem to mind. They seemed content to only walk, speaking to each other.

The woman never smiled. She seemed unhappy the whole time the man was there with her, and they saw that when he touched her she never seemed pleased by it. It led many of them to think that He had abducted her. Others protested that they were clearly married, and that if she wanted help all she had to do was call the local police and report him. She only had to run away and spare herself the misery, they pointed out. What was stopping her?

Perhaps they did not love each other, the traveler had suggested. The innkeeper shook his head and shrugged.

The Devil doted on his bride. Every time they saw her, she was dressed in fine clothing. The day they came and walked around, he never let go of her. They kissed and he stroked her and spoke into her ear. He picked flowers and put them in her hair. The woman whose flowers he had cut had been angry that he had not asked permission, and despite her fear had tried to open her door to yell at him. It would not open even though she had undone the lock. She tried her windows next, and though she had not touched the cord, all the blinds came down and would not part when she tried to open them. The next morning, when she woke, all her prized flowers were dead.

Nobody had seen them leave. They had turned a corner to advance into the next street, and when the person at the next house waited for them to pass his window, nothing came. One by one, the villagers poked their heads from their windows and asked their neighbor where they had gone, but no one had an answer. They had simply vanished.

The innkeeper seemed absolutely convinced of the story. The traveler was still doubtful.

There was a lane along the road, the innkeeper had informed him, that led to where the Devil and his bride lived. It was a long way from the road, surrounded by a thick forest that gave the feeling to those who dared enter it that their presence was unwelcome. In the center was a large white house. It appeared clean and well-kept, surrounded by a beautiful garden and a tall fence.

'Not everyone who veeseets comes back, "the innkeeper had said. 'And when zey do, zey do not remember what zey saw."

When the traveler found it, he found that the innkeeper had lied to him.

It was not a house but a mansion. There was a gate and not a fence around it; it's sharp, detailed ironwork gleaming in the light like blood-wet arrow heads. A gravel path led to the front doors.

So the Devil was a wizard, and not only that, he must be wealthy to own such a home. The traveler was not surprised. He smiled, and continued toward the front gate.

Perhaps this stranger would be amused to hear the stories about himself the Muggles had made. The traveler was curious to see what he looked like. Did he really look like they said, or was that too an illusion, for the sake of keeping his own privacy?

And his wife—the traveler looked up when he reached the gate, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. The innkeeper had told him she was often seen by a window, staring out into the wood.

Once, she had even been seen in the garden, sitting on a bench and speaking to another lady. The traveler wondered if he would be able to see her at all.

Movement caught his eye. The traveler looked up, and his face went pale.

There was a woman, at a window, her front pressed against the glass by a tall figure whom the traveler could not see clearly. It was clear they were in the middle of coitus. The woman was clothed, thankfully, her skirt lifted up from the back, but as the traveler looked on, stupefied, he could see the motion of the male figure as he pushed against her. One hand was caught in her hair, the other gripping her hip. The woman's expression was a mixture of pain and pleasure. Her eyes were shut, too preoccupied in her lover's attentions to notice the voyeur at her gate.

The traveler could not look away. He did try, and repeatedly failed. Something was forcing him to stare. Red mortification burned at his face, and at the same time, a shameful arousal stirred within him.

The male had hunched over the woman now, his head in her shoulder. The woman, the poor woman, writhed underneath him. Her palms pounded against the glass. Her mouth was open wide. When he pulled away the traveler could see blood had been drawn. It trailed down her neck and over her breast, staining her clothes. Her mouth moved—she seemed to be pleading with the man. Whatever it was she said, the traveler could not hear. Her lover's response was to reach around and hold her by the throat.

What kind of man is he? The traveler thought hysterically.

The man at the window looked up and caught the traveler's eye. The traveler's heart froze, and was inundated with terror. The man smiled, his teeth stained red. For a moment, the traveler was sure his eyes had turned red, too, but he wasn't standing close enough to tell. It was enough to send his heart racing again, thinking back to the days when Voldemort had been the biggest threat in his world. The man gave a last hard thrust to the woman, and keeping eye contact with the traveler, held her against him, turning her head to kiss her. She looked ready to fall over, but noticed her lover's gaze and, breaking the kiss, she followed it to meet the stare of the petrified traveler.

The traveler found little comfort in confirming the fact that she was as beautiful as the innkeeper had told him. The haunting look in her eyes as her cheeks burned red as his gave him the sickening realization that what he had just been forced to witness had not been entirely consensual.

He could still feel the hostile stare of the lover. The traveler was dripping with sweat though he stood perfectly still. A second later, he was released, and without wasting another moment he turned and ran.

It was a shame that he could not Apparate. It was a shame he did not have a broom. It was a shame he'd had to give away his horse. It was a shame he'd listened to the innkeeper at all.

The path had disappeared. The traveler looked around wildly for it, but it was gone.

Impossible.

He had been standing right at its end. He had run back in the way he was sure he'd come from, but it seemed he'd only succeeded in getting himself lost. He'd lost his pack

somewhere along the way—he didn’t care. Everything in him was screaming for him to get gone.

The forest was darker now. It was still silent but for his heavy breathing, the crash of each footfall over bramble and root. The hairs along his body prickled, and he knew something was after him.

There was no choice but to run. He went blindly in one direction.

When he could not run anymore he was forced to stop; doubling over, hands braced on his knees as he gasped for breath. The forest pressed in around him, choking him.

Footsteps, coming near. Shaking, the traveler looked around, preparing to run again. His stomach twisted.

“Who’s there?” he called as bravely as he could. “Come out!”

His weak voice reverberated around him.

His mouth went slack in astonishment as the innkeeper stepped out from behind the thick trunk of a tree.

“Monsieur?”

“I knew you would come,” the innkeeper said, smiling. He still wore the same greasy apron he’d been wearing when the traveler had left that morning. “Everyone always wants to see for themselves.”

The traveler, drunk with fear, did not comprehend. He was too preoccupied in noticing that the innkeeper’s French accent was missing.

“You followed me here, Monsieur?”

The innkeeper smiled again. It was the same, normal smile, but the traveler was not comforted by it.

“Did you see them?” he asked.

“Yes,” the traveler said, blushing.

“What did you see?”

“He... he was hurting her.” The innkeeper looked away in shame, that he had not done something to help.

“Are you glad you came?”

The traveler’s insides twisted again. He wiped the sweat from his forehead.

“Something is not right here, Sir. We should go.”

The innkeeper did not move. He had not stopped smiling.

“Are you glad you saw what you came for?”

“No, no. I should have never come.” The traveler began to walk again. “We’ve got to get out *now*.”

“Then you’ll think twice about coming onto my property, won’t you?”

With his back to the innkeeper, the traveler froze. The innkeeper’s voice had changed dramatically. It had turned from warm and friendly to cold and commanding.

Against his better judgement, he turned.

The innkeeper was gone, and in his place was the devil. He was tall. He was blond. His eyes were so light they were almost clear. He wore no smile.

“M-Monsieur?”

“I am not some lowly innkeeper,” the man said impatiently. ‘I am the owner of this property and the “Devil” of these woods, as you’ve come to call me.”

The traveler could only shrink back as the devil approached.

“Every last one of you hears a ghost story and you come running,” he said, assessing the cornered traveler from his toes to his head. “I knew you simpletons had little else to do but gossip, but ever since one of you fools started that nonsense I’ve had a number of strangers showing up here at my property just to take a peek at what they shouldn’t.”

“Forgive me,” the traveler said, resisting the urge to bow, to sink to his knees. Something about the devil suggested he was not an ordinary wizard who liked to play cruel tricks on strangers. He had an air of nobility and power around him, and it made the traveler want to cower or hide himself away where he might never see those eyes again. “Forgive me. I didn’t mean any trouble.”

The devil laughed. “Spare us the lies and I might be more lenient with you. You heard about a mysterious, beautiful woman and you couldn’t help yourself.”

The traveler hung his head. “Y-Yes, my Lord.” He’d taken a guess with the title, but oddly, it felt right.

The devil’s eyes gleamed in satisfaction. “You learn quickly. Well, you saw her, didn’t you? Are you satisfied?”

The traveler did not know how to answer. The devil seemed to be able to guess his answer.

“You arrived faster than I expected. The others usually took longer. You were not meant to see me fucking my wife. I ought to take your eyes for your insolence.”

The traveler sank to his knees, a wordless cry emitting from his mouth. The devil looked down on him without emotion.

“I’ve killed all the others who came before you, you know,” he said matter-of-factly. “There have been *several*.”

“My Lord...”

“After the first ten I killed the innkeeper because he was the one who’d started the stories,” the devil said, smiling as if recalling a fond memory. “He made good money off the tourists who came through in search of a local haunt. Another bought his business and it started up again. Intruders would show up outside my gate, demanding a spectacle. I gave it to them and killed them all.”

He'd begun to circle around the traveler as he spoke. The traveler remained frozen on the ground, his eyes wide with horror.

"Of course, I could just have put up more wards to keep you all away. I might have done that from the beginning. The truth is, John," the traveler jolted in surprise at the devil's use of his name, "that I didn't want to."

"W-why, my Lord?" John croaked.

The devil stopped pacing. "Because I was bored."

"Oh, Gods..." John clasped his hands before him as if about to pray. "I didn't mean any trouble, my Lord, I swear, please forgive me..."

The devil ignored him.

"I made a deal with the innkeeper. I would donate to his business if he sent me one or two a month. Always randomly. I like to be surprised."

Remembering how the devil had shifted from the innkeeper to his own form, John dared to raise his head despite his feeling he was about to be sick. "You sent me here yourself. You told me the stories to get me to come here... my Lord."

The devil grinned. "I impersonate him from time to time when I want to make it more fun."

Having no resistance left, John hunched over and retched.

"I think I'll spare you," the devil said thoughtfully. "But I won't erase your memory. You'll have to live with what you saw as penance for your own curiosity. It was tame, by my standards, but I can feel your disgust."

John's eyes almost bulged from his head. "Thank you, my Lord. I'll never bother you again, my Lord, I swear." He tried to stand quickly, and was held down by the devil's hand on his shoulder.

"I require a gift for my generosity," he said, and the traveler went pale.

"A gift, my Lord? I have nothing to offer."

The devil released him. "I want nothing that you own. When you are at your sister's wedding, I want you to tell the story of the Devil and his bride to someone, and send them to me."

John clutched at his stomach. His head spun. "My Lord, *please*, I can't."

"Shall I order you to send me your sister?" the devil asked, his eyes narrowing. "Or shall I just kill you now?"

Tears had begun to leak from his eyes. "No! I-I'll send you someone, my Lord. I'll... tell them the story."

The devil was unmoved by his pathetic display. "If you manage my task, you are welcome to return. I will have a gift to congratulate your sister on her marriage."

What could that be? A number of grisly possibilities ran through John's head, but he dared not refuse.

"You are very kind, my Lord."

The devil indicated that he should stand. "Only if you do as I say. I will give you three days to send me some sport. If you fail, I'll find you myself, and I'll bring you back here and dispose of you like I should have done the moment I saw you staring at my wife."

John flinched.

The devil clicked his fingers, and John reared backwards as something large and heavy fell beside him, as if it had been dropped from the sky. He rolled away from it, covering his head, fearing that more would follow, but after a tense five seconds nothing happened and he turned to look at it, heart pounding.

It was his pack.

He looked around. The devil had gone. He got onto his hands and knees, and retched onto the ground.

[X WEEKS LATER]

Hermione had been standing before the clear window staring out into the cloudless sky when a warm, gentle hand touched her shoulder and made her jump.

"I'm sorry," Pansy Parkinson said softly as Hermione turned to face her. "Did you want to be alone?"

Hermione smiled at her, the brooding air around her lifted by the sudden company. "No, no—I was only thinking."

"It's very early, I thought I'd have to wake you."

"I've always been an early riser," Hermione explained distantly. "But I'm glad you've come—I meant to find you earlier to see if you wanted to go for a walk."

Pansy smiled, but it had a strained feel to it. "I won't object, but it will have to be later."

"Why?" Hermione ran her hands through her hair, gathered it loosely into a knot at her neck. "Is Lucio awake?"

"He's come back."

Hermione's smile withered.

"I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to be sorry for," Hermione said, busying herself with tightening the sash around her robe. "It's nothing you could prevent."

"No—it's just—you looked so peaceful all while he was away. I'm sorry I ruined it for you."

Hermione straightened. "It had to end, at one point or another." *He always comes back, no matter how hard I wish for the opposite.* "I confess I forgot it was today, but not this early."

She made for the door, but caught Pansy's look of having something else to say. She paused and gave her friend a curious look.

"What is it?"

"He wants you to put on the green dress," Pansy said. "He said you'd know which one. And that you'd know what else to do."

Hermione looked away. Pansy shifted uncomfortably.

"Shall I wait for you, or will you meet him alone?"

"Alone, please." The thought of having her alongside when she met her husband again was comforting, but Hermione tried to limit the amount of interactions between herself and Draco that Pansy saw. She could always sense Pansy's pity for her, and knew she could not help it. It never affected their friendship, or she tried to think that it didn't. At the very least she could hide parts of their terrible relationship, and let Draco think his old school friend was still loyal to him, though she sensed he only put up with her because he knew she so desperately needed company.

She went into the closet to change and emerged a moment later, undoing her hair. Better to take it down than leave it up, where it ran the danger of being torn out or painfully held by his overzealous hands. It had happened before, and Hermione wanted the transition of his arrival to happen as painlessly as possible.

Unlikely, she thought.

Hermione turned to face Pansy. The silk of her skirt swirled around her legs with the movement and she pushed it away distractedly, her other hand reaching up to rub at her temple.

"Was he alone when he arrived?"

"Yes, but I took the child to greet him." The formalities that she usually used were gone, and had been since Draco's departure at Hermione's insistence. Pansy was the only person Hermione felt close to, besides her son, and she couldn't stand to be addressed so formally by a friend.

Hermione hesitated before asking. "How does he look?"

"I can't say." Pansy said, not meeting her eye, and Hermione understood what that meant.

Like a ravenous beast. Her legs felt weak.

"Wait outside the door, please," Hermione said, and Pansy left obediently.

Hermione took in a deep breath and smoothed her skirt, trying to distract herself.

She'd forgotten he was due back today. He'd caught her off guard. She'd held the foolish hope that he would be delayed, knowing that would never happen. It was like a sudden Auguamenti over her head, like being dropped through a hole in the floor compared to the blissful two weeks of waking feeling unburdened without his presence. It'd been foolish to

hope, as always, but she couldn't help herself. At least she'd been granted thirteen days of blessed silence and solitude, which in these days was more than she could have asked for. In the times past, when he'd had to spend time away from the Manor, he'd Apparated into the Manor whenever he'd wanted her company, and as result she'd spent the whole duration of his supposed trip tense and hypervigilant for the unannounced moment he would appear and snatch her. But this time, it was different. He'd actually left her alone, and she was grateful, though resentment still pushed its way to the surface of her mind. Of course he knew she would be. Nothing he did came without purpose.

However, the temporary absence of worries and anger had allowed her to relax, and when Lucio awoke every morning they had set off in the car to a far off town to engage in activities normally denied to them when Draco was around. He had banned them from going to the closer villages and never said why, but she didn't care as long as she wasn't locked up inside that house.

She'd not allowed herself to dream, but still every day there was that faint whisper, that web of disbelief that settled over her, the peculiar feeling of near normality. Just a mother and her toddler son, buying fruit at an outdoor market. Browsing a bookshop, tasting sweets, talking to strangers; having actual, earnest, happy conversation, walking around a park at dusk, rather than apparating or taking portkey. It was addictive and unsettling, that feeling. It was like slipping into a favorite old sweater that she'd forgotten she owned. She'd cried the first time it'd happened.

Normalcy. She'd never realized how badly she'd craved it. Muggle things; elements from her past life. Freedom. It filled a void inside her, though each fix was only temporary and left her craving more.

Strangely, it also alleviated the ache caused by not being able to use her magic. It felt like a hand in between her ribs, as if Draco had reached inside her and grabbed her magic in a fierce grip, and every time she tried to use it the fist tightened, threatening to crush it into nothing.

She had given up asking for it back. It yielded the same result as fighting, demanding, asking, begging, for her freedom.

Nothing.

But every day that he'd been gone she'd reveled in the feeling of peace, of his absence.

This is what life without Draco is like, it whispered to her. *Remember what it is to be free?*

She didn't. Or she couldn't bring herself to. It was too painful.

The sound of her son's laugh floated to her from the lower level. Draco would be with him now—perhaps he'd brought him a gift or was merely asking what they had been up to while he'd been away. Lucio, her little angel, would be hugging his father and prattling on with that childish lisp of his of how they had gone wading in the stream behind their house, or how they had seen a small fair down in the village.

She hadn't even seen him yet and already she was tensing up, turning back to stone—a Medusa of sorts. Hermione's heart pounded—he had been away almost a fortnight. Draco rarely spent so much time away unless he had no choice, and when he came back he usually

had a starved demeanor about him, like he had gone and been separated from her for years rather than days. She was well used to his sexual appetite but still didn't like it—the idea of him pulling her into any one of the rooms for a hard fuck made her heart sink and she wished there was a way to delay it, if not stop it altogether.

Always with the hope, she thought, angry with herself. *Years of it. And I'm still here. I'm still his.*

There was a tap on the door. “My Lady, He grows restless. He is impatient to see you.”

There was the shift back to formality. Hermione rolled her head back and around in a last attempt to relax but was unsuccessful. Already she could picture Draco waiting in the sitting room for her, eyes cold and turbulent, hands tensed and ready to touch her.

Restless indeed.

Shaking her head to clear out the image, Hermione made her way to the door. *I had better hurry.*

Time had ingrained Draco's most important rule into her mind, hard as she might try to fight it: *Never deny him*. It had taken time and almost endless fighting, but here she was at last, the obedient wife, groomed to her husband's tastes. Or so he liked to think.

Still, that thought left an extremely bitter taste on her tongue, but now was not the time to brood. Hermione exhaled slowly, gathered herself into a less nervous bundle, and exited the room. Pansy escorted her down to the first floor where Draco and Lucio were both gathered in the hall. Her keen eyes took in everything and at once felt uneasy. She had expected smiling faces but was met with stony silence and Draco's consuming gaze. A cold wash of fear spread down her body. Lucio's arm was in Draco's grasp, his poor tear-stained face peeped out at her from behind her husband's legs. Pansy stood behind them, her hands clasped at her front.

“What is it?” she asked immediately, approaching faster. Draco's eyes were narrowed and accusatory but Hermione missed the look entirely—she had eyes only for her son.

“Leave us, Pansy,” Draco said, and once his servant was gone he released Lucio and strode up to her.

“I'm sorry, Mummy,” Lucio's small voice reached her before Draco's hiss did.

“What were you *thinking*?”

Hermione went to Lucio first and crouched down to wipe at his eyes, then turned to Draco. “About what, Draco? What are you talking about? What's wrong?”

“I told him we went to town,” Lucio said feebly. Hermione frowned, and cupped his cheek in her palm.

“It's alright, my darling,” Hermione told him, and then to Draco, demanded, “What's wrong with that, Draco? You said it was alright.”

“Not anymore. You put yourselves in danger.”

“Don't be ridiculous, nothing happened,” she insisted.

“After what happened last week something might have,” he said angrily, placing his hands on his hips. Hermione was perplexed—what was he talking about? She had heard of nothing. Lucio sniffled and she turned back to him.

“There’s no need to cry, my love,” she told Lucio. Wiping at his eyes, he nodded. Hermione turned to Draco. ‘We need to talk,’ she said, “but first you should apologize to your son for frightening him.”

Draco hesitated, but walked forward, a rueful smile on his lips. Lucio saw it and relaxed easily, but only Hermione could see the steel that remained in his eyes.

“I’m sorry, love. I didn’t mean to scare you or Mummy.”

“It’s alright, Father,” Lucio said, and caught Draco’s offered hand in his own chubby little fingers. The fear had fled immediately and he relaxed, smiling once again.

“I brought you a gift,” Draco said, “it’s by the door. Go on and play with it, but for now Mummy and I need to talk in private. We’ll join you soon, okay?”

“Yes, Father!” Lucio gave his father a quick hug and then sprinted off to find his present, and Hermione and Draco were alone.

Hermione watched her son leave with a sadness that smarted at her eyes—the love her little boy gave Draco was more than he deserved. Not at all for the first time she wondered if he would still love his father if he knew just how their family had come to be, right from the very beginning, but all those thoughts were immediately silenced when she felt her husband’s arms wrap around her from behind. He pulled her to him roughly, turned her around, spread his palms on the sides of her head and brought her so close their noses touched.

She was already breathless, her lungs hardly daring to draw in more breath under his gaze. He nuzzled his nose against her, his eyes never leaving hers, hands secure on her head, holding her still. Hermione felt her bravery falter—no matter how many times she had been through this, the fear would always be present. His eyes held a power that always threatened to consume what was left of herself.

There was the familiar pressure of his lips crushing against hers—almost savage in their beginning but as he satisfied his craving he gentled and gave soft, lingering kisses as he waited for her to relax in his arms but she remained impassive, and his kisses regained their urgency. Hermione closed her eyes, wound her arms through his and pressed her palms flat against his back. Inside, her heart pounded, dreading what was to come. Hermione frowned as he moaned into her mouth, let him plunder her lips and felt his shudder, the stirrings of pleasure in his trousers.

Feeling absolutely hollow, she let her fingers run through his hair and lightly massaged his scalp, and some of the tension drained from his shoulders. When he kissed and nipped at her neck it was her turn to shiver though she only felt the pain and no pleasure. His tongue swept across her bottom lip, his hands controlled her movements; one at the back of her head and the other on her side, holding her to him. Hermione pulled her arms away from him and made to end the kiss but his arm caught her hand and led it down his front to feel his erection and stroke it over his trousers. He was staring at her so intently, eyes clouded with lust, she couldn’t meet his gaze. His cock was lengthening in her hand, growing stiffer, and he let his

head fall back; his breathing became labored. His hand tightened around hers and slowed her strokes; she felt his heat through his trousers and wished he would let her go.

This was their strange and complex dance—one he had doomed them to for the rest of their lives. He gave and took from her and she was expected to react, and if she felt like it she gave, too. It was a rare occurrence but the mere fact that it *did* happen was enough to cement his hold on her. Largely unspoken, but one of his rules nonetheless: *always be responsive*.

Sadly, Hermione didn't always have to act for this. He studied her passionately, like she was an exam he was quite determined to pass, and had unfortunately done well in the process. Distancing herself from the assault was never easy—her mind was too full of hate, too aware of her surroundings and him, to be exact. On better days he left her alone while she was in the palace of her mind and made no move to disturb her there, but had no qualm over disturbing her body. On worse days he took her anyway and made damn sure she felt everything he did to her, and that she finished before he did, and because he was greedy, he made sure she came repeatedly. Not because he was a considerate bed partner, but because he knew she did not want it, at least not from him, and he enjoyed taking it from her. It was another way of reminding her just who she belonged to.

When his lips left hers Hermione didn't meet his eyes. She could sense his gaze on her and knew just how his eyes would look—hooded, frosted over with lust and framed by those long, dusty lashes. He wanted her to look at him and she refused to. The pride that lately had crept into them whenever he looked at her—what he'd turned her into—she couldn't stand to see.

Anger flickered inside her but she paid it no mind. For years now she'd been angry but what had come of it? Granted, she had every right to be angry, every right, but now was not the time to be angry. Draco was fierce in his lust, and when she denied him, he only grew worse.

"I missed you," he murmured, leaning into her, touching their foreheads together. Pillow soft and just as warm, his lips brushed against hers. "I can't stand to be away from you."

Hermione tried to shut out his words. He was kissing her jaw, sucking on her neck. Her heart began to pound.

"We missed you too," she lied. *At least, one of us did.*

The kiss turned harder. With his arms he jerked her closer, pulling her into him, one hand followed the curve of her ass and the other cupped the back of her head. Through the silken fabric his fingers pressed intimately into her and she took in a sharp breath. She was already wet. Hermione looked away, blushing angrily. A laugh rumbled in his chest, she felt his smile against her lips. Slowly, his fingers began to tease and stroke along her lips and Hermione's legs began to shake. She broke the kiss for air and his mouth traced along her neck. The feel of his hot mouth on her skin made her head swim—Hermione didn't like that.

Insistent, his lips pressed against hers and she turned, struggling to gain balance. When he noticed he broke the kiss and his pale eyes took her in, questioning at first and then serious. His hands were still on her. Hermione didn't smile. That was one requirement she'd been spared of, at least.

"Not here," she whispered, clutching at the lapels of his jacket. Bent backwards as he had her, she was afraid she might fall. Draco nuzzled at her neck, randomly pressing kisses into

her flesh, leaving rosy marks where his teeth decided to make an appearance. Hermione's knees were buckling but he held her in place.

"Draco, not here," she repeated. If anyone walked in on them...

"Yes, here," he spoke into her skin. The vibration of his voice against her tickled her and yet she felt it all the way down to where his fingers were still teasing at her, rubbing against her clit. A deep flush burned at her skin where he kissed her. "I haven't seen my wife in ages so I'm giving her a long, *warm* greeting." As he said the word 'warm' he'd applied more pressure with his fingers and Hermione stifled a moan. He pressed harder and she bucked, biting at her lip.

"Let it out, sweetheart," he purred to her, holding her tighter. "I've got you."

"I'm going to fall, Draco," she said shakily. "Let me up."

The hand on her slit was gone—she nearly stumbled but Draco had anticipated the movement and walked forward swiftly until she was pressed between him and the wall. The too-quick movement made her dizzy, she hadn't noticed when he'd pushed her skirt out of the way until she felt the direct contact of his fingers massaging around her clit, the cold air prickling at her bare legs, one of which he'd hoisted up and around his hip.

"Draco, don't—" he silenced her with a kiss.

With the pads of his fingers he resumed stroking her slowly, fingers damp with her arousal. Still afraid of falling, Hermione's hands latched onto him by his lapels once more. Suddenly, his sharp teeth bit into her lower lip and she cried out as he increased pace and pressure, and she began to writhe. Little by little he dipped them inside her, drawing it out until a hoarse "Please!" clawed its way out of her throat; only then was he more than happy to oblige her, and his greedy fingers finally pushed inside her. Hermione couldn't help the exclamation that pushed its way out her mouth. Draco's other hand was busy at her hair, pulling gently so she tilted her head back. At her sound of pleasure he shuddered again, groaned, and curled his fingers inside her.

"If Lucio sees..." her own moan cut her off, she braced herself against the wall. He continued to thrust his fingers inside her, too slow, too teasing. She wanted more, and hated herself for it. Her husband could sense her inner struggle. To his credit, he didn't grin smugly but she knew he was pleased. He pulled his hand from her, and she let out a breath, leaned back against the wall. He kissed her again, his hands working to opening the front of his trousers.

The moment his cock was free he pressed her flat into the wall, hiked her skirt higher, ran his hands up her thighs to grip her hips and pushed inside her roughly, earning himself another sweet cry from her. They paused a moment, breathing hard, and he waited for her to adjust. Her body pulsing around him, holding him so sweetly within her, that beautiful heat, it was almost enough to undo him then. Enough to shatter him to pieces. Draco pulled back, thrust again and she let out a throaty moan which only grew louder as he set a hard pace, driving himself inside her as deeply as possible.

There was no regard to gentleness—his hands were set to possess, to love in the only way he cared to. He had been away for too long and would be denied no longer, especially when she proved so willing.

The emerald gown she wore had a deep neckline; a favorite of his since he'd first seen her in it. She'd been just showing in her pregnancy then, and her breasts had been swollen like her stomach and he'd been stunned by the way she looked in it. He made her wear it often, with nothing else underneath and her hair flowing like a wood nymph, his ring glittering on her hand. She detested him for it but obeyed, and he would relish the way her nipples pressed against the thin fabric, the way the skirt revealed and hid the curves of her hips and ass with any movement. While he'd been gone he'd spent every day thinking of her in that particular dress and now she was here, her sweet body crushed against his, cunt hot and slick around his cock, heart beating frantically against his chest, breasts dewy with sweat, it was all he could do not to tear it off her right then and there.

Her breasts were covered by two wide, long strips of the green silk, ending at her navel. He could see the hard tips of her nipples pushing into the fabric. On impulse his hand reached forward to tear the fabric away but at the last second he changed his mind and simply pushed aside the silk covering one breast, admired it for a moment and tasted her nipple with his tongue, circling it around the hard pink bud and then, trembling with the overwhelming desire to have her, enveloped it in his mouth and applied the softest pressure with his teeth at the same moment that he drove himself back inside her. His wife gave a soft cry and arched, shuddering. He pulled out almost entirely and pushed back in slowly, and repeated the action, teasing her by not pushing in all the way. Hermione drew him closer to her, her hands pressing urgently into his waist. Draco moaned and claimed her lips. Triumph roared through him, his free hand took the place of his mouth and teased at her reddened nipple. Her hands came up to hold his head closer to her breast.

"Draco, please..." she clenched around him and Draco groaned loudly, feeling himself tighten in response.

The way she looked now, he wanted to immortalize. Flushed and filled by his cock, vulnerable until they finished and she turned to stone again. Mesmerized, he reached up to cup her cheek.

The night before he had left he had made love to her angrily, knowing how she felt about him leaving. To not invoke his anger, she had denied it but he'd seen the truth in her eyes. Lost to his anger, he'd been much too rough and when he awoke the morning after she had not been in bed, and it wasn't until he was about to leave that he found her asleep in the garden, tucked deep into the bed of lavender, curled under the shade of an oak wood tree.

A mockery of a prince, he'd kissed her to life and she had woken at once, watching him warily. The question in his eyes presented itself to her and she'd answered.

"I didn't feel like staying inside."

By some strange grace she had let him carry her back inside, back to their bedroom, where that time he was more gentle, and she was able to achieve orgasm unlike the night before. He had made her accompany him to the door, like every other time, and without prompting she'd kissed him goodbye, but once he'd turned back outside the gate she'd already closed the doors.

All while he'd been away, and upon returning, he'd allowed himself to foolishly hope that she had missed him. He knew what she really felt, however.

"I dreamt of you every night, my sweet love, my beautiful wife," he crooned softly into her ear, punctuating every word with a hard thrust. She was wincing, wetness glistening just under her eyes, her jaw clenched. He could feel her body respond ravenously to it, angled his hips to get deeper inside. Her mouth had opened involuntarily, her eyes were screwed shut—denial or pleasure, or both? Draco pressed himself flush against her, so that he was buried inside without an inch to spare. Her head fell back, she panted loudly, her eyes less than half open, looking at him with exhaustion, resignation. Draco wrapped his hand around her throat and resumed thrusting, hard enough that she moved against the wall every time he pushed back inside.

She shut her eyes again.

"Not here," she pleaded hoarsely, one last time. Draco ignored her.

She let out a shattered cry which he silenced with his kiss, and kept thrusting until she fell limp against him, panting, just as he gripped her harder and came inside her, holding her to him until he was utterly spent. He could feel it running down her legs, sticking to her skirt. There was a faraway look in her eyes but he didn't mind; it took a moment for his vision to clear and his breathing to calm down.

When he was done Draco laughed gently and wiped the sweat from her brow. Her eyes were refocusing; she blinked once, twice. He pulled out from inside her, his cock glistening and hot, already aching for more. He still held her leg wrapped around him though she was mostly limp. She was still recovering, too tired to adjust her skirt. He looked down at the gift of his homecoming and felt a surge of satisfaction. He carefully set her leg down so she could stand and let her long skirt back down, trailing his hands along her hips as he stood back up and gave her a soft kiss.

Flushed and full of self-loathing, Hermione had come back to herself and recovered her breast. Her nipples were still over-sensitized from his attentions to them, and the sensation of the silk against them was distracting. Her legs still shook—she had to lean against him when he pulled away, and his smirk grew bigger but he gave her his arm.

"Can you walk?"

Hermione wanted to glare but decided against it. "Yes, I think so."

Draco cupped her face in his hands and gave her a kiss on the forehead. "I'd be happy to carry you."

"I'm fine," she snapped. "I had an orgasm, not a stroke."

Together they left the hall.

Draco's thumb absently stroked her ring as they went along. Hermione wondered if he was thanking it. After all, without it, he'd never have been able to capture her. The gemstones flashed and buzzed pleasantly under his touch and she looked away, frowning.

The damned thing. How many times had she envisioned herself blasting it to pieces? Throwing it into a vat of lava? Forcing it down Draco's throat?

From the moment it had been forced onto her finger she'd done nothing but hide it and try to take it off. He wore his proudly, like a medallion from the Wizengamot.

“Are you hungry?” she asked him.

“Only for you,” he said, giving her a heated look.

“Why were you so upset about us going to town?” she asked, wanting to change the subject.

“Speaking of that—you won’t be going there again anytime soon,” he said.

“Why not?”

“There was an attempted attack on my estate in Italy,” he replied. “And the one in France.”

Hermione gave him a side glance. “Just how many do you have?”

He raised her hand to kiss its back. “Many and more, little bird. We’ll be visiting them from time to time, soon as my duties allow.”

More hiding places. Did these estates exist before or after I came into the picture?

Hermione hesitated before asking “Who led the attacks?”

His voice was sharp. “Who do you think?”

Hermione’s face went pale. *Neville*. He was still alive. How was he? Could he have built up a new resistance? Harry’s eyes flashed back to her, blue and void of life. Suddenly all she wanted was to be alone.

“They’re still looking for you.” He laughed to himself. “The still haven’t learned, have they?”

No, she thought dimly. It’s been years. They gave up on me. Now they only want you. Tears pricked at her eyes and she looked away.

“It’s not like they’ll actually find us,” she said bitterly. “You’ve made sure of that.”

“For good reason. I don’t need anyone else trying to take what’s mine away,” he said. “Your place is with me, not them. If they need another reason why I’ll be happy to supply one.”

Hermione resisted asking just what reason he would give them. She suspected, but was afraid of him confirming it.

“Well maybe if you didn’t taunt them—”

“I’m not taking any risks, Hermione. Anything beyond this property is off limits until they are dealt with. They’re not like to find us here but I don’t want to leave that to chance, do you understand?”

“Yes,” she said quietly. Resentfully.

“I mean it. I refuse to lose you again.”

“I know.” She couldn’t help the edge in her tone.

“And,” he added, “if you so much as think of taking our son and going off to look for them
—”

“Stop!” she shouted, and the tears she had held back until that point began to fall. “Merlin, *enough!* I already said I wouldn’t, what more do you want of me? Are you going to use him against me so I won’t leave? Is that why you made me carry him in the first place? Just so you can have a bargaining tool?”

Draco’s arms crushed her against him, she fought to pull away.

“I love you, and I love our son,” he said. “He is the best of the both of us, and I couldn’t have asked for a better child from you, Hermione. I promise you I will never harm him.”

Liar.

She didn’t want to believe it but she couldn’t deny what her gut was telling her. She thought she knew him but there was so much he could be hiding from her at any given moment. She’d learned that over and over. Draco was not human. She had nothing to prove it other than memories. For all she knew he could have gone and made Horcruxes of his own, like his former Master. Hell, he’d even confessed he’d thought of turning her into one, a prospect that made her want to vomit whenever she dared dwell on it. He didn’t shy away from horror, torture or any other atrocity. There was no telling what his limits were, at least where they didn’t concern her. He’d told her himself he would stop at nothing to keep her to himself, and despite his love for her son, which she was still unsure as to its genuineness, she held the constant fear that one day his temper would slip or that he would sink to new levels of depravity and sociopathy. He’d killed her friends, her schoolmates, countless others. Once, to get her to obey him, he had told her of the women he had raped and killed before kidnapping her. He’d killed the most prominent wizard of their time. He had killed *Harry*.

What was another tally to that list? Nothing seemed to bother him. Would he hesitate to kill his own blood?

Then came the next fear. Lucio was a sweet boy, curious and eager for amusement. She saw nothing of Draco in him—she hoped this would continue as he grew older.

The thought of him developing into a younger version of Draco terrified her. Draco’s influence was strong, and it was clear Lucio loved his father very much, as he didn’t know the extent of the rot that lay beneath that polished exterior. Draco at least played along when Lucio was present, for which she was thankful. He would not hurt her or show his sadistic tendencies when their son was close by, and saved it for when they were alone. With Pansy’s help, they were able to keep the illusion of a happy, loving couple, although sometimes Draco’s intensity did bleed through, as it had earlier that day.

He waited for a response from her but she remained distrustful and silent. Draco cupped her face in his hands.

“You and I were both so lonely. I knew a child would fix that, and you’re happier now aren’t you?”

The lies came one after the other, all with ease. The promise in particular was not one. He had forced a child on her as a desperate attempt to keep her tied to him, knowing that she wouldn’t dare harm herself for fear of the infant’s well being. In truth, he hadn’t expected he would have turned out to care so much for the boy but he did and now he was as protective of his son as he was of Hermione.

Over the past months he'd come to revere his wife as he hadn't before—for her strength, for creating such a perfect child. After everything she'd been put through, and by him no less—she was nothing short of a divine being in his eyes, and he was more than willing to pay worship.

The day of Lucio's birth he had stayed with her all those hours though the mediwitch said there was nothing to worry about. The circumstances of his own birth had yet to be forgotten and he worried that the newborn might be born with the same heart condition he'd had, and was there to ensure that Hermione not do something foolish to try to save her child. The words had been at the tip of his tongue as he'd held her hand even when she screamed at him to leave her alone, that all this was his fault, that she had not wanted this; he had seen the panicked look in the mediwitch's eyes and made sure to Obliviate her after.

We'll make another one, he had been prepared to say. *Let this one go.*

There had been no need. Lucio had come, red and squalling, filling the room with his noise and Draco had watched anxiously as Hermione held the squirming bundle to her breast, her face a contortion of grief and defeat. But those had only lasted a short moment.

He had seen the look of love on her face. The fierce look in her eyes as the babe had been taken away from her before she could protest and given to Draco so she could be healed and cleaned. Draco had taken advantage of that to give his son a proper name, as he'd suspected the one his wife had already chosen would not be to his liking.

She still had not forgiven him for that. She still had not forgiven him for many, many things.

Hermione had calmed down at last and pulled away.

"I didn't mean to upset you," he said for the second time that day. "I just wanted to make sure."

Hermione sighed. "I'm not going anywhere, Draco."

Not like I can, after all you've done.

"Come with me," Draco took her hand and led her to their bedroom.

Draco led her to the bed and pulled her onto it, settling down comfortably.

"What did you do in the village anyhow?"

Hermione let him curl around her. His hand rested on her hip. "I took Lucio around to look at the outdoor market. I bought some flowers and we ate at a little restaurant a vendor recommended to us."

"Was it good?" He brushed a piece of hair off her forehead.

"Yes."

"What else?"

Her throat felt a little sticky from the cry she'd had earlier. "I bought Lucio some new books and we raced to the cinema. Nothing extraordinary."

“You’re teaching him about Muggle things?”

She gave him stern look. “It’s how I was raised, Draco. It’s important to me and he’ll learn a lot from it.”

“I didn’t say it was a bad thing, Hermione. Maybe you could show me too sometime.”

She paused for a moment, then remembered herself. “Perhaps.”

He stood suddenly, undressed, and entered the bathroom. He left the door open as he entered the shower and began to run it.

“Where did that come from?” Hermione asked, sitting up. There was a fresh scar she didn’t recognize that ran across his thigh.

“Someone cut me,” was all he said. He was already clean but craved hot water and steam to help him relax. Before coming home from a hunt he made sure to wash all the blood and dirt off. Hermione knew that he hunted, but not what, or how. If she found out she would not be surprised, but it would be another reason to hate him, and she already had plenty.

Hermione frowned, unable to imagine a situation in which he had allowed someone to come close enough to physically harm him, much less with a knife.

“What was your mission about?” she asked, stepping into the bathroom. The scent of his shampoo filled the air.

“Just a meeting with someone else,” he said distractedly. “An old acquaintance.”

“Do I know them?” she asked suspiciously.

“Are you jealous?” came his teasing reply.

“Never,” she said. “I only wondered if they were from Hogwarts.”

“You’ll meet them soon enough,” Draco said in a tone that suggested he would say no more. Hermione sighed, and just before she could take one step to leave the room the glass door to the shower stall opened, and steam rushed out.

She could see his figure through the steam. He said nothing, but continued to wash himself. Hermione knew he would not ask.

She grit her teeth and began to undress.

A/N:

‘Elle appartient au diable.’—‘She belongs to the devil.’

I was supposed to upload this yesterday but got caught up in something else. If you can, please leave a review and let me know what you think. I’m excited to finally share this. Thank all for reading and your support with my other stories. Updates will be slow, warning you now.

I know that ‘His’ was meant to be the last chapter in the HLB series but the story’s never left my mind, and I wanted to give it the ending it deserves.

xO

C

2. An Important Lesson

A/N: So I realized recently that it's been about six years since I posted my first story here on FanFiction. At this point in time, HLB has 1k+ favorites and His Persephone is about to reach that mark, too. I never expected my stories to get this much traction and it still makes me surprised and happy to get daily notifications from people who are still reading it for the first time or for the tenth. Thank you all so much for reading and bearing with me all this time, for all your reviews and critiques and messages. If I'd never joined this site I don't think I'd ever have kept writing or pushed myself to grow as much as I have since 2011. I'm extremely proud of the work I've accomplished on here and I'm sincerely grateful for all your support. Thank you, and please enjoy this chapter.

Rape warnings for this chapter.

Two.

The dining room was silent. Draco sat at the head of the table, eating soup. Hermione hadn't touched her food at all. She sat still, her hands hidden underneath the table, worrying the fabric of her dress. Draco's legs extended under the table, spreading wide enough to cross over her legs. They could hear birds chirping far away, the open window letting in a weak breeze. Sunlight filtered in from the tall, wide windows, and all the silver on the table gleamed prettily. It was so strong it hurt her eyes. Hermione fought back an impatient sigh.

The sound of the door opening caught their attention. Draco and Hermione looked up from the table.

"My Lord." Pansy said, and bowed. "Your guest has arrived."

Draco wiped his mouth with his napkin and put down his spoon. "Good. Take him to my study."

Pansy bowed again, and left the dining room. Hermione and Draco stood from the table. He took her hand, kissing its back.

"You didn't eat anything," he said. He hadn't even looked at her plate.

"I'm sorry," she lied. "I wasn't hungry."

"I'll have them send you something later," he said, and a servant approached to help him into his cloak. "It will storm tonight, but I'm sure Lucio would benefit from a long walk today. He's much too hyperactive."

"He's only a child, Draco," she said, withdrawing her hand. "It's to be expected."

“Let him take his broom this time,” he said. “I won’t have you coddling him. He needs to toughen up.”

“He doesn’t need anything,” she replied stiffly. “He’s fine the way he is.”

Draco gave her a stern look. “No son of ours will be weak. He must be taught as early as possible the right way to be.”

“He is a *boy*,” Hermione said, catching herself in time to keep from hissing at him. Still, their earlier peace had already fled. “Let him enjoy his childhood, Draco.”

“I never said I’d take that from him,” he said, more calmly. ‘I only want to make sure my son will be as strong as me.’ He reached up to cup her chin. “I’ll not accept weakness in this family.”

Hermione felt a sharp reply rise up, but bit it back down. If she argued now, he might change his mind about allowing them outside for the day, and she really needed a long walk.

“Yes, my Lord.”

He smiled, and cupped her face in his hands. “I’ll see you in a few hours. Pansy will accompany you. Don’t go too far.”

She nodded, and he kissed her lightly on the lips before exiting. She watched him leave, her hand resting lightly on the table, her fingertips grazing against her cutlery knife.

The day was bright and hot, but humid. Thick, dark clouds hovered in the horizon, drawing near. The gardens were fragrant, lush, plants hanging heavy with their flora. Hermione wiped at sweat running down the back of her neck. She’d arranged her hair all up so that none of it hung down—she could feel the effect of the humidity whenever she touched her hair. It had frizzed and turned into a tangled mess. She couldn’t stop reaching up to touch it. Strange, but it was comforting, somehow.

Lucio had run ahead of them and into the cultivated land that stretched on for miles. They heard his shouts of laughter as he zoomed above them on his broomstick, occasionally flying past them with a wide grin on his face. Hermione had fought against the broomstick for a while, arguing that Lucio was too young to learn to fly, but Draco had given her an order. He’d learned to fly when he was young, too, and if that was true, then his ability had been passed down to Lucio. Draco had taught him the basics and safety tips, and then let him run loose. She had worried, because he still took a spill now and then, or went too quickly or too high, but he always seemed to remember to come lower, or slow down, and Pansy was able to soften all landings with her wand.

She remembered how fine a Quidditch player Draco had been at Hogwarts—not as good as Harry, to be sure—she couldn’t remember a single match he’d ever won as Slytherin’s Seeker, but perhaps Harry had just had more luck. Lucio was only four. Would Draco want to send him away to school? Was it better that way? He would be out of his father’s influence. Draco had hinted once that Hogwarts was not an option for Lucio. Hermione remembered he had told her once that Lucius had wanted to send him to Durmstrang, and he would have gone gladly had Narcissa not intervened.

"If she hadn't," he'd said to her as he'd stroked her then still-pregnant belly, "I wouldn't have met you as early as I did."

He seemed convinced that no matter what route their lives had taken in any other universe, they still would have met.

"Even if I'd met you ten or twenty years later, no matter how long, I'd have made you mine," he had told her more than once.

She believed him.

Hermione pushed a damp, wilted lock of hair away from her forehead. She saw Pansy reaching for her wand.

"Don't," she said.

"But you're hot," Pansy insisted. "Let me at least do a Cooling charm."

"I don't mind it," Hermione said, staying her hand. "Really. It's always so cold in there."

Pansy put away her wand reluctantly. "He gets angry at me when he sees I'm not doing my job."

Lucio zoomed past them, waving. Hermione waved back, smiling.

"Before we go back inside, you can help me freshen up," she said. "He doesn't have to know."

That seemed to appease Pansy, and they walked on. The birds were louder here, where the trees were thickest. They stayed underneath them for shade. Lucio, meanwhile, had dipped down low to fly out above the lake.

"Do you want to race?" Hermione asked suddenly.

Pansy looked at her, dubious.

"Can you, in that dress?"

Hermione looked down. "It's light enough. I can move about just fine."

Pansy bit her lip and looked around, then shrugged. "Alright. To where?"

"That tree." Hermione pointed to it. "The one on the edge there, beside the pond."

"I hope the water's cold," Pansy said, grinning. She bounced on her heels. "When was the last time we ever raced?"

"I don't want to think about it," Hermione said half-jokingly. She took off her shoes, preferring to run barefoot. Giddiness took over her. The earth beneath her toes was warm, vibrant, blades of grass pricking and tickling her toes. There was a sudden breeze—it was cool against her throat.

"Mummy, what are you doing?" Lucio asked, approaching them with his broomstick in tow.

"We're going to race from here to that tree," she said. "Do you want to run, too?"

“Yes!”

“Alright. Get ready.” She grabbed the excess fabric from her dress that might be tripped over and tied it into a knot at her thigh. “Ready?”

“Yes!” Lucio and Pansy echoed.

“Go!”

Lucio zoomed ahead of them on his broom. Try as they might, they couldn’t catch up.

“Unfair!” Hermione bellowed, laughing as she slipped on the grass. The knot on her skirt was becoming undone around her legs—the fabric was too slippery. She bunched it in her fists and launched herself forward to catch up to Pansy, who was slowing down.

When they met Lucio standing proudly by the marked tree, Hermione picked him up and hoisted him into the air. He shrieked with laughter.

“I beat you!” he said.

“Well,” Pansy said, trying to catch breath, “we didn’t say he couldn’t fly.”

“That’s true,” Hermione said. “You naughty little thing!” she kissed his cheek.

Once she had set him down he promptly began to take off his shoes and pull up the legs of his trousers. His little fingers fumbled with the fabric.

“Can I go into the water, Mummy?”

“Yes, darling.” Hermione took his broom and leaned it against the lowest branch. “Don’t get your clothing wet or your father will be upset.”

They were all sweating profusely. Pansy was fanning the back of her neck.

“Merlin, it’s so hot,” she said miserably. “I wouldn’t mind a dip, myself.”

Hermione smiled. “Well, why not?”

“He’d get angry,” Pansy said quietly, so that Lucio wouldn’t hear. “We all look like a mess. Here, let me fix your hair, my Lady.”

“None of that now,” Hermione pleaded. ‘Please. I want to enjoy the heat.’ She lowered her voice. “I won’t let him punish you.”

Her promise didn’t appease Pansy.

“But he’ll punish *you*.”

Hermione gathered up her skirt around her knees again. “I’m used to it. I’ll live through it,” she said, and walked over the hot grass straight into the surprisingly cold water.

Lucio was half-bent, humming to himself, swishing his hand through the water to watch the ripples. He held a wet, shiny rock in the other hand. Hermione sat on the edge and motioned for Pansy to follow suit, which she did, cautiously. The worry in her expression melted into bliss as her legs dipped into the cold, clear pond water.

Hermione sighed, thankful to be outside of the mansion. Each time they moved, Draco would add new things to their next house; a greenroom in one, a pool in the other, a music room, a play room for Lucio and one for them, the list went on. The locations varied, too. Icy landscapes or rolling green hills, goats and sheep bleating in the horizon.

He claimed each time that he had grown bored of the scenery, that he was too restless to live in one place permanently, but she knew better.

Someone was chasing them.

He never showed signs of worry, and they stayed in each new place from anywhere from a few months to a year—he claimed it was because he wanted to travel, but the most travelling they ever did was to the small villages or towns they ended up nearby, because one thing all these houses had in common was that they were very remote. Hidden, unmapped, unreachable, unless he wanted them to be. She remembered the shocked, hungry gaze of the stranger at the gate as Draco had fucked her against the window. That was the only place they ever went back to frequently.

She knew Draco liked to play tricks on the locals, but never inquired too deeply into it. Sometimes it was best, especially when there was nothing she could do about it. She had never suspected Draco to have a voyeur fetish, either, but looking back on certain comments he'd made in the past, it suddenly made sense.

Pansy had recognized her distant, troubled stare and engaged in conversation with Lucio, who was also familiar with it. Grateful, Hermione took Pansy's hand in hers and brought it into her lap. Her ring flashed on her finger in the sunlight. The sun bore down on them all. Hermione felt its burn on her skin, and waded deeper into the water, her feet burrowing into the cold slime at the bottom.

"My La-Hermione, please don't go too far," she heard Pansy call. She nodded. Lucio was still in the shallow depths. She watched him fashion a little paper boat out of a piece of paper Pansy summoned and set it on the water's surface, making waves with his arms to send it one way or another.

He looked so much like his father. It hurt to see, sometimes. All he had gotten from her was his curly hair.

Draco had been so, so proud, after the birth. He carried his newborn son with him all the time while she healed, and she had seen the satisfaction in his face every time. He'd treated her like a queen during the pregnancy and onwards since, acting as if their procreation had been consensual on her part, like she had wanted it all along. He had presented his son to his followers, proudly named him his heir, while Hermione was forced to watch silently, gripped with a fear so big it rendered her frozen as she imagined her son, grown and the spitting image of his father, standing there beside him in front of the congregation in their black and gold robes. One by one they had all lined up and knelt before them, the family, swearing fealty and service until their death. It was the most absurd, frightening thing she had ever seen.

As Lucio grew older, Draco expected more of him. He had employed tutors and taught him to play Quidditch to promote quick-thinking and flexibility, had him learn to play music on many instruments, ordered him to learn at least three languages.

Hermione had agreed to all these. Lucio was naturally inquisitive and clever, and she was eager to have him be as successful a student as she had been. Perhaps, she found herself hoping frequently, if he went off to school he would make friends and learn things about his father he was made ignorant to here, and would turn out a different sort of person than his father wanted him to be. For now, though, she would make damned sure that Lucio would not come to idolize his father as everyone else seemed to.

I'd rather die than see him turn out exactly like his father.

Draco had not hit her since the start of her pregnancy, but that was far from the end of the abuse. His lust had somehow spiked even more since, and none of his particular tastes had gone away yet, to her misfortune. Luckily, Pansy tended to Lucio whenever Draco had her, so they would not be disturbed. Lucio had seen his father annoyed, upset, sometimes angry, but he had never seen the extremes that Hermione was well used to behind closed doors. She made damned well sure that didn't happen.

She did it because she did not want to traumatize her son, or have it leave lasting effects on him, but sometimes she wondered if it was for the best to show him once and for all what his father really was. No matter what she did as a mother, it usually felt like she had made the wrong choice. She looked to the day that her son became an adult in fear and paranoia, wondering how the actions she took might contribute to however he turned out.

Later on she might have convinced herself that they had somehow gone through a time jump, a flashforward into the near future. It felt like only seconds had passed from when they had all waded into the water to when they heard Draco's voice cut through the sound of the moving water.

Hermione blinked, and saw Pansy grabbing Lucio's hand and pulling him out and away from the pond, his smile fading into confusion until he saw his father standing behind them.

"Hullo, father," she heard him call. "Come swim with us!"

"I'm afraid I can't, love, I need to talk to Mummy. Take him inside, Pansy," Draco said. "Draw him a bath and see that he eats his dinner and then straight to bed."

"Yes, my Lord." Pansy lowered her head in deference and hurried off, casting a worried glance at Hermione. Lucio waved at her, unaware.

Hermione realized with a start that she was half-submerged in the water, shivering. The water was colder now, the air still humid. The sky was growing dark, fat, heavy clouds looming wherever she looked.

Draco walked in right after her, grabbed her by the arm and all but dragged her out, his grip so severe that she almost yelped in pain.

Hermione's stomach sank. He must have thought...

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he hissed.

"Draco, I wasn't—"

"Why do I bother keeping Pansy around if you don't let her do her damned job?" he asked her angrily. "Is she encouraging you to behave this way?"

“No,” she said quickly. “It was too hot—I wasn’t going to, Draco, I swear.”

He stared hard at her, as if he didn’t believe her, but settled down after a moment. “Good.”

Thunder broke over them. Draco’s grip transferred from her arm to her waist, and he steered her back towards the manor, just as it began to rain.

“I told you it would rain,” he said reproachfully.

Hermione was having difficulty keeping up. Her wet skirt clung clumsily to her legs, making it a chore to reach down and adjust every other step she took.

“I know,” she said. “It’s just so hot; we needed to cool down.”

He stopped, his hands falling along her form to grab at her hips gently, his cold fingers pressing intimately into the wet white fabric.

“You don’t know how tempting you look,” he murmured, his eyes molten as he dragged his eyes down her figure. His hands moved to grope at her ass, bringing her body against his. He kissed her damp neck. “Wet, wild, and beautiful.”

“Who was your visitor?” she asked in hopes of distracting him. It didn’t. Draco grabbed her arm again and led her quickly back into the manor, to his study.

“An old acquaintance,” he said offhandedly. “You’ll meet him someday soon.”

“I should go check on Lucio,” Hermione said, trying to pull away.

“No.” He pushed her, front first, over his desk. Wrist cuffs appeared from nowhere around her wrists, securing them to the surface. Her front was pressed against the cold surface. His hands were on the back of her dress, tearing it in half along her spine, until it fell into a heap onto the floor and she was nude, shivering. He muttered something and her hair tie snapped apart; her hair in all its tangled glory fell down her back. She heard the clink of his belt buckle and the weight of his clothes falling onto the floor, and pressed her forehead against her forearms, legs trembling, waiting in bitter resignation as he grabbed her by the hips again and came closer.

He rubbed the head of his penis along her slit. Hermione bit her tongue as he pushed inside roughly and began to thrust without waiting for her to adjust. He let out a long, pleased hiss through his teeth. His hand slid up her back to her neck, his fingers sliding into her hair to grip close to her scalp. He applied slight pressure, pulling just enough to tilt her head back. The desk, although solid and heavy, rattled a little with each push of his hips. A bottle of ink slid further towards the end of the table.

Hermione winced as the force of his thrusts slammed her body against the unforgiving wood of the desk. There would be bruises later. Just as he wanted.

Draco slowed suddenly, to her relief, loosening his hold on her hair. He wrapped one arm underneath her, his palm resting against her lower belly. He stroked her there softly.

“Would you bear me another son if I asked?” he said, bending over her to speak into her ear.

Hermione froze, her face went white.

He grinned and gave a hard thrust, hitting against her cervix. Tears of pain welled in her eyes and she bit her tongue again to keep from screaming. Her hands formed into fists and her arms strained against the cuffs. Her knees threatened to buckle. He did it again and she arched her back, gritting her teeth.

“Draco, *please!*”

He ignored her. *Thrust.*

“Or would I have to force you again?”

Draco kissed her shoulder blade, pulled out, and rushed back in. This time, Hermione let out a loud, agonized cry.

“No,” was all she could say. *Thrust.* He throbbed inside her. She wanted nothing more than to push him off. Tears slid down her cheeks.

He shuddered against her, clearly aroused by her pain, but he became less rough. The heat coming from him was making her perspire.

“You don’t know how badly I want it,” he said, and resumed thrusting until he spent himself inside her with a groan, pressed so closely against her she was afraid for a moment he might never come out. He stayed pressed into her for a moment to catch his breath. The heavy rush of his breath filled her ear.

He released her and she collapsed against the table, struggling to stand. The hits against her cervix always made it painful to walk after. He knew it, and still did it anyway.

When has he ever cared? she thought, her legs shaking. He was kissing her neck, pushing her hair aside to press his mouth to her shoulder. He licked the sweat from her skin. Hermione turned her head away, and the cuffs finally fell away. Feeling rushed into her hands; she flexed them slowly.

Draco helped her sit down after cleaning her off wandlessly. The blood vanished from her thighs but his semen remained. It began to trickle out of her vagina and her stomach turned. He had her on his lap, made her rest against his chest, her head cradled into his neck and shoulder. He stroked her hair slowly. He sat arrogantly, like a spoilt prince, slung back against the seat with his unoccupied arm thrown over its back, his legs spread, his softened cock nestled in the gap between her thighs and his. It was obscene. It made her seethe.

“I don’t want another child,” she said carefully.

Draco looked down at her curiously.

“Don’t you want Lucio to have a brother?” he asked. “Or a sister?”

“I don’t want to run the risk again of resenting or even hating my own children because I didn’t agree to have them,” she snapped. “One is enough, Draco. You took it from me without asking. If there will ever be a second, it will be *my* choice, and my choice is no.”

Draco smiled and pressed a hand to her lower belly. A yellow glow emanated from his hand, transferred to her body. Recognizing it as a contraceptive spell, Hermione relaxed.

“Thank you.”

For allowing me autonomy over my body. Her skin crawled with hate.

"I love you when you're like this," he said. He kissed her forehead. "Sometimes I worry I stole too much of your fire. I'm glad to be wrong. All the same, I hope in the future you'll change your mind."

Never, she thought.

"There's a lot to be learned about raising a child before rushing to have another," she said coldly. "It isn't something to be done on a selfish *whim*."

His grip turned more painful. A warning.

"I don't regret it," Draco said, and her stomach coiled with hate. "And I think it's best for you to remember, *wife*, that I don't need your consent. I could have left you tied to that desk and filled you with my cum day after day until you were with child, and no matter how much you argued or cursed me I'd still have done it. Would you rather have that, little bird?"

"No!" she hissed, aghast.

He gave her a hard stare. "Then do not provoke me. Sometimes, you come extremely close."

Hermione's lip trembled.

"May I leave, my Lord?" she asked stiffly.

He helped her stand and kissed her. He did not require her to reciprocate this time, thankfully, so she stood there and didn't move until he stepped away.

"Pansy," he called. The door opened, and Pansy entered the room, her black robes sweeping over the floor.

"Yes, my Lord."

Draco made no move to hide his nudity. By now, it was something they were all used to. Hermione, however, still abhorred being nude in his presence, no matter how frequently it occurred. It made her feel more vulnerable than ever, and she was vulnerable enough here, even when clothed.

"Take Lady Hermione upstairs and heal her," Draco said. "She may need assistance with walking."

Pansy walked quickly to Hermione while Draco had his back turned to them, shrugging on his robe. She looked curiously at Hermione, who ignored her, fighting to keep her tears in check.

"Send my son to me, when you are done," Draco said, and Pansy bowed.

Walking was uncomfortable, but not as painful as it had been on occasions past, for which Hermione was grateful. When they had got past the door and it closed behind them she paused, realizing she had left the remnants of her dress behind.

They looked at each other. Usually, Pansy was the one who mended her clothes when Draco tore them, but neither of them wanted to go back inside.

Hermione attempted a smile, but it was weak.

“Can I borrow your robe?”

“Of course,” Pansy said quickly, blushing, chastising herself for not having offered it sooner. She slipped it off immediately and handed it to Hermione, who accepted it with a quiet ‘thank you’.

When Hermione had secured it around herself they resumed walking. By now, Hermione’s tears had recessed and was only aware of the churning of her stomach as she thought about what Draco had told her.

“Do you know what he tells Lucio, when they’re alone?” she asked Pansy suddenly.

“Usually he questions him about his studies,” Pansy replied. “Other times I’ve heard him telling Lucio about his grandparents, but only in passing. Most of the time, I am too busy with other duties to listen.”

What stories was he telling Lucio about Lucius and Narcissa? Ever since Lucio had found out whom his name bore semblance to he had been overly curious to find out more about his deceased grandfather. Hermione hadn’t known Lucius well enough to oblige him, but why was Draco doing it in private? It had never been a secret to her that Lucius Malfoy was as corrupt and scheming as his son. Draco had told her stories of his childhood since his death, including all the bad ones, but she wondered now if he was omitting any of these from his son to paint a better picture of himself and his family.

I wouldn’t put it past him.

It wouldn’t make much sense, though. Draco had no shame. He always felt himself guilty of nothing, was embarrassed by the same. There was not much sense in hiding his family’s unsavory past to anyone, much less his son. She didn’t know how she felt about him telling these things to Lucio, either. If he wasn’t careful, Lucio might grow up to idolize and try to emulate or even follow the same path as them.

She would have to talk to him, quickly, and explain it all.

They had reached the bedroom by now. Pansy led Hermione to the bed and let her sit, but not before Hermione took off the robe and handed it back, fearful of getting fluids on it.

Pansy took out her wand. “Where, my Lady?”

Hermione’s midsection still hurt from where the desk had dug into her bones and flesh there, and the skin was already yellowing and bruising, but Draco always fucked her to leave marks, and expected them to remain there until they healed.

“The usual,” she said instead, and Pansy bent low and administered a soothing and then a healing spell that alleviated the ache at once. Hermione felt her lower half wrapped in a warmth that usually was not provided by the healing spells, and realized Pansy had added that in extra.

“Thank you,” she said.

“How do you feel?” Pansy asked softly. “Did he hit you?”

“No,” Hermione said. “We only argued, but he made his point.”

She stood, her skin raising from the cold, and grimaced as she felt more of Draco’s semen trickle down her thighs. She half-regretted having given up the robe so soon, but at least with Pansy, there was no awkwardness around nudity. They had been forced to move past that very quickly, thanks to her husband.

“Do you need anything, before I go?” Pansy asked.

Hermione had half a mind to ask Pansy to eavesdrop on Lucio and Draco, but knew that Pansy would be uncomfortable doing it, and it would place her job at risk.

He would find out, quickly, too, and punish us for it.

“No,” she said. “I’m going to take a bath, and then I’ll be in the library. Please bring Lucio to me when he’s done with Draco.”

“Of course.” Pansy inclined her head, as Hermione hated being bowed or curtsied to. She left the room, and Hermione immediately went to wash off Draco’s scent from her skin.

Pansy went directly to the nursery once she had left Hermione, her thoughts troubled.

When Draco had come into power three years ago he had sent word to her that he had a job proposition for her, and that it paid well. Pansy had been travelling abroad at the time of his sudden rise, and he had promised room and board, and that he could trust no one else with the job. She was to keep house, but most importantly, be a sort of lady-in-waiting to the actual Lady of the house. She accepted at once and returned home.

Draco had met her in his office. They had never been very good friends at Hogwarts, but had got on well enough. He had shown her her new living quarters and paid her upfront for the first three months, told her the rules of the manor and supplied her with her uniform. He had not pressured her to join his followers, but she did so anyway, donning their robes happily enough. Voldemort was one thing, Draco was another entirely, or so she’d thought. Ever since he had went into hiding after murdering Dumbledore, she had lost contact with him (in truth, they’d stopped speaking long before that) and then he was rumored to have been at the Battle of Hogwarts though hardly anyone had seen him, but he had made his presence known at the Final Battle after that, when he had killed Harry Potter.

The damage dealt to Hogwarts during those battles forced the school to remain closed for a year for rebuilding. When it opened again, not a single sixth year from the year before came back. They had all received their diplomas by owl. Pansy had fed hers to the fire.

By then everyone had known Hermione Granger was married to Draco Malfoy. Pansy herself had even forgotten about Granger, thinking that she’d run away for some silly reason, or that she’d died over break. She was gone from the daily life at Hogwarts for so long, after a point, others forgot about her, too. Just not her closest friends. They had struggled to deal with her disappearance for ages, and the Weasleys and Longbottom made sure it was quite the open secret that she was his, unwillingly. Pansy didn’t really care much, at the time. She had found it hard to believe that Draco would have kidnapped Granger, of all people, but the Gryffindors appeared absolutely convinced, and when the headlines hit the papers months

later, she still couldn't help but wonder if perhaps the two had just fallen in love in secret, and run off together. Neither the Slytherins nor the Gryffindors were happy about it—she supposed the Gryffindors had immediately jumped on the kidnapping accusation simply because they couldn't believe the truth. To be sure, in the pictures Granger always looked unhappy and stiff next to Draco, and stories of his cruelty and the origins of his obsession with her floated around, spread by old classmates who had learned of it too late—those who were still alive, anyhow. There were so many theories it was hard to know what was truth and what was not.

She was shocked to find it was all true. Most of it, at least.

Draco had given her a tour of the manor, introduced her to their new infant son proudly. She was to watch over him and feed and clean him whenever they were not able to do it. She was to meet visitors at the door and announce them to Draco, and to look after the needs of Hermione Granger.

She was to be respectful and polite at all times.

She was to obey every order without questioning or talking back.

She was to use wandless magic as often as possible, so that she might master it and eventually have no use for her wand.

She was to never leave the area without his approval, even if she was with Lady Hermione.

She was to never allow Hermione to escape or harm herself. She must keep watch on her at all times.

She was to *never* tell any outsider what happened inside the Manor, or she would risk extreme punishment.

He had made her take a Wizard's Vow at the end of the interview. By then she was having doubts, but he looked at her so expectantly with his hand out, she could do nothing but take it, and repeat his words.

"I do so hereby swear fealty, secrecy, and obedience in my servitude to Lord Malfoy," she had said after him, "until the day of my death."

He had been pleased. There was a meal waiting for her in the kitchen, he said, and the infant needed tending to. She would meet his wife later. He would call for her.

"How will I know when you call for me if I'm in another room?" she asked, and he smiled knowingly, and held his hand out again.

Uncertainly, she gave him hers. He tapped his wand to her wrist. A mark surfaced there—she held her breath, thinking with distaste of the hideous Dark Mark, but this was only the Malfoy crest, to her relief, and no bigger than her thumbnail. She had seen it before, when she had visited his family when they both had been children. A new addition had been made. A beautifully illustrated little blue finch was in one corner peering out at her with bright black eyes.

She bowed, and he left. She had taken her meal alone and tended carefully to the baby, and when he had fallen asleep she went to her room to unpack. There wasn't much to move around, so she decided to take a nap and wait for Draco's summon.

The call had come an hour later. The mark on her wrist *pinged* suddenly, as if someone had rapped their fingers against it with enough pressure to know it was not an accident.

She reported to the Malfoy's bedroom at once, nervous, but confident in her new robes.

She heard his call for her to enter, and did, cautiously, unsure of what to expect.

She found Draco standing by the bed, dressing himself. He was completely nude and she averted her eyes, not knowing how common an occurrence this would become. Her eyes landed on the bed and stuck there in shock at finally meeting the Lady of the House.

She was nude, each limb affixed firmly to each of the four posts on the bed, bruised and bleeding, redder than she'd ever thought a human could turn; fighting back tears of humiliation as she forced herself to meet the eyes of the unexpected intruder. The skin that wasn't red with embarrassment was as pale as the white sheet underneath her. She had been gagged.

"My Lady," Pansy had whispered; her usual coolness in tone wrecked by her shock.

Pansy had paused, surprised, to see her former schoolmate like this after so long a time. Beautiful, captive, distraught, Hermione had seen that correlation in Pansy's eyes and the tears began to spill. She turned her head to hide her face with her restrained arm and shook with emotion.

Pansy had never seen anyone look so miserable. Longbottom's accusations against Draco resurfaced, and she felt her stomach drop. That was the exact moment she realized the truth.

I'm staring at the aftermath of a rape, she remembered thinking, and her stomach fell lower. She thought she might be ill.

Draco had watched her carefully.

"Heal her, and draw a bath," Draco had said from the doorway, and left. Hermione's features wavered as she tried to keep her face still. With her back turned, Pansy was able to see all the marks Draco had left on her body.

Pansy did her job without a word. Her hands shook but her patient, to her credit, did nothing more than blush. The tears had dried. Pansy had helped her dress—Hermione had been too sore to walk properly so she'd opted for a robe. Then she left, and Pansy was left to follow the rest of Draco's instructions.

It's stayed the same, more or less, for three years, now.

She didn't know why it still shocked her; Draco was not and had never been a saint. Everyone saw the way he loved her—he was scarily gentle with her, like one breath could scatter her like leaves in wind. But when she disobeyed, or displeased him, he was as cold to her as he was to everyone else, though he reserved her punishments for when they were alone. When he wasn't cold he was cruel, and that was oftener.

No one ever saw how cruel he could be to her, she whom he cherished so, his 'little bird', as he called her. But Pansy heard it almost every night, and by then, it was much too late to say that this was not what she had expected, that he had not told her in advance that she would have to watch after a woman that he had broken. She might at least have been allowed

time to prepare herself the shock of seeing her the first time after he had used her, and she realized later, that it had been a test. That it could (and did) get worse.

If he had just wanted her as a dishscrubber she would have more happily accepted that, knowing the other option. Ideally, she'd never have taken the job and would have stayed abroad in Germany, studying ruins of ancient castles. Here, she wished that the housekeeping was her *only* duty, but the House Elves took care of that mostly, so really all she had to do was announce guests, arrange accommodations for when he called a meeting or special occasion with his followers and the like. He paid her more than well enough for her duties, but she felt that considering the added emotional component, she ought to have demanded more. She was no stranger to what happened in private between a couple, and it was to be expected of the Dark Lord and his wife.

But not like this.

Draco was not shy. Nor did he balk at the thought of there being a witness to the crimes he committed against his wife. Hermione's screams coming from behind the door troubled no one, not even from the first night they had been heard. They were frequent, and varied in tone. Pansy was forced to endure hearing them most nights. She could hear everything Draco did to her, and she wondered why he never took the trouble to cast a sound-silencing spell around his room, so that she didn't have to hear it.

He likes it, that's why, she'd concluded. He's a narcissist.

As if knowing her distress, he had forbidden her from consoling his wife after their relations. He would emerge from the darkened room, and Pansy would say nothing as he closed the door behind him and gave her a warning look. She had mentioned this to Hermione once, and Hermione was angry but said it was for the best.

"Pity can't help me," she'd said simply. "He does what he likes. I may not like it, but he's made sure I can't fight him. So I fight him in other ways."

Pansy had no doubt this was true, but it still didn't escape Pansy, the perverseness of it all, the heartbreak of having to hear her sobbing and cries of pain in such a terrible manner.

The screaming wasn't always negative. Sometimes it was the good kind that *should* happen during sex. She was certain Hermione tried to keep those at a minimum but it was no secret Draco was greedy in his desires, and so he made sure to wrest them from her throat with pleasure. Still, those instances were few and far in between.

None of it ever seemed to bother Draco. He locked her in that room and hurt her, day after day, and Pansy could say nothing. She knew he'd chosen her for the position because he knew she'd do her job, and she did it well, but she hadn't anticipated the hatred and pity that would grow inside her. (Not only that, she was sure his jealousy prevented him from having another man this close to his wife.) Not wanting to put herself into the hands of Draco's wrath, Pansy concealed her feelings well, though they sometimes bled through. Whenever he summoned her into the room after the rape, to tend to the bedding and other things, it was a strike to her heart to find an utterly ravaged woman trying to care for her wounds without magic. Pansy was powerless to be apathetic towards her.

Every morning after, though, when Hermione left the bedroom she was still Lady Malfoy; her carefully blank face like carved marble, her posture hauntingly erect, ever aware of her

own domination. Not a tear to be seen, even if there'd been the regular cries only minutes before. When Draco kissed her in front of everyone she took it, her cold facade melting into a blush—embarrassment? Anger? And everyone fell in love with her a little more.

Such strange phenomena, Pansy thought.

Upon the wake of Voldemort's death at the hands of Harry Potter, all the Death Eaters had been captured and the majority were sent to Azkaban to await trial, except for a handful, the most depraved, whom had been executed swiftly. They had been stunned over their loss to a schoolboy, at the loss of their Master.

Until a new one had come.

And when he demolished the infamous prison and freed them all, a new fire had been ignited, before the smoke from the last one had even cleared.

Draco's followers loved him like they would love a god. They were fervent, humbled in his presence, but they fell at his knees easily and never dared disobey him. He had them all in his fist.

Pansy couldn't remember such devotion for Voldemort. They had obeyed him, to be sure, but aside from Bellatrix, nobody had *loved* him like they did Draco. It was something that gnawed at her thoughts often. Draco was not kindly, he was cold and arrogant, entirely conscious of the power he held over people. He was akin to his former Master in the way that they were both monsters. No shame nor guilt ever crossed their minds. They craved destruction and power, and stopped at nothing to achieve it. No act was too heinous for them.

The main difference was that Draco was human. Voldemort had turned himself into a beast; slick and cold, red-eyed, lacking only a forked tongue and fangs to complete the effect. Everyone hated to look at him, sometimes, even the most devoted. When he had got truly angry he was grotesque to look at. Pansy's grandmother had been one of his early followers, and before she had passed away she had told her stories of the early days of Voldemort, how handsome he had been then.

Pansy couldn't gauge for herself how true this was, as there were no existing photographs of Voldemort whatsoever, so she was forced to take her Nana at her word. Draco, however, was the most beautiful man she'd ever seen. He was human, at least in appearance, and he was powerful. Was that not enough?

He had made himself a Lord. He had stolen himself a wife, gifted himself a child, seized his own power.

Everybody loves a self-made man, Pansy thought drily.

He could be kind, when he wanted to be. A few days after Lucio had been born he had summoned all his followers for a feast and presented them both proudly, one in each arm. Hermione had been resentful, fighting back tears of anger, but when Draco had bid her sit down with the babe in her arms in his seat before the congregation, like a Madonna with child, and everyone had rushed into a queue to press a kiss to her toes, as they normally did for Draco, and then gaze more closely at the infant and add him into their Vow of loyalty to Draco and Hermione.

Pansy had been standing by Hermione's side the entire time, knowing without looking at her directly, that Hermione hated every second of it. She had sat stiffly on Draco's throne with her hands holding tight to her baby, barely repressing a cringe whenever someone uttered a thoughtful blessing, that she might bear Draco many more children in the future.

Draco had made them stay for the feast, but it was not even halfway over when Hermione insisted she was tired, and the babe needed feeding. Draco, who had taken many cups of wine, had kissed and groped her in front of everyone while they looked on and cheered. Pansy had taken her upstairs to the bedroom where Hermione breastfed Lucio, and then fell asleep with him in her arms while Pansy stood guard at the door.

She had cried every night for a week since the birth.

Pansy had not expected that she would come to care for Hermione. In the beginning, she had tried to remain detached, to clean, heal, escort, and leave the room as quickly as possible.

But she had started to linger, and she had asked a few tentative questions. From there, they had somehow formed a bond—as much as a friendship could form within these confines and circumstances.

Draco had told her of her attempted suicides, and though there was less risk of her trying again because of Lucio, that she must still always remain vigilant, for Hermione's cleverness was something he could not suppress or break from her.

When she entered the nursery, she found little Lucio awake in bed, flipping through a book with an expression of such intense concentration on his face Pansy found herself shocked for a moment, that he looked like the mirror image of his mother when she had been in her first year at Hogwarts.

She knocked on the door frame and he looked up and smiled.

"Hullo," he said sweetly.

"Your Papa wants to see you, dear," she told him.

"And Mummy?"

"She's taking a nap."

Lucio gathered his book and together, they headed to Draco's study. Lucio held her hand all the way.

"Father says one day I won't need tutors anymore, and I'll go to a proper school somewhere," he said matter-of-factly. "He said his old school was a castle. Is that true?"

"You shouldn't doubt your Father," she said, "but yes, it's true. I went there, too. We were classmates."

Lucio's eyes went wide. "Was it a big castle?"

"Oh, yes," Pansy couldn't help the longing tone in her voice. "It was very big. I used to get lost in it and cry my first year there."

"Do you miss it?"

She squeezed his hand.

“What was my Father like? Did he get into lots of trouble?”

“Not very often,” she said. “He was quiet, but protected his friends. He was among the top students, and so was Hermione.”

“How did she and Father met? Were they best friends?” he asked, just as they came to the door.

Pansy struggled to find an answer.

“I think that’s a question for your Father.”

He nodded, and Pansy knocked on the door. Draco answered, and they walked in.

“Father, how did you and mummy meet?”

Draco looked away from his bookcase, where he’d been looking for a suitable book to read aloud from.

“So that’s what you meant by wanting story time.”

Lucio grinned and wiggled in his chair.

Draco went to sit back down at his desk.

“Your mother and I met at school. We were both eleven. Very young.”

“That doesn’t sound young,” Lucio protested. Draco smiled wryly.

“We didn’t like each other. I was very rude to her and she ignored me.”

Lucio struggled to understand. Mummy and Father always appeared to love each other very much. “But why?”

“I was young,” Draco said, shrugging a shoulder. “I was a little foolish. I believe she was inferior to me. This all changed years later.”

“Did you become friends?” Lucio asked, frowning. “Did you tell her you were sorry?”

“We resolved our differences,” Draco said vaguely. ‘Your mother is the strongest, smartest witch I’ll ever know. She impressed me daily. She’s also very beautiful. I knew I wanted her more than anything I’d ever wanted before.’ He paused. “I married her as soon as I could. I let nothing get in my way.” He looked Lucio square in the eye. “This is important for you to learn. When you want something, you take it. Don’t leave it up to chance. If I hadn’t taken your mother she would have married someone else and you wouldn’t be here.”

Lucio was frowning, taking it all in with serious eyes. Something did not sit right with him about his father’s words but he didn’t know how to express it. He played with a loose thread in his sleeve.

“Don’t fidget,” his father said. “Look at me.”

Lucio obeyed.

“You are a Malfoy,” Draco said. ‘You will lack for nothing and hold more duty and privilege than others your age. I expect you to never disgrace our name, and if you do, make sure no one hears of it. I will help take care of any problems you have until you learn to take care of them yourself. You aren’t like other boys your age. Your mother and I expect much from you.’ He smiled affectionately at his son. “But I know you won’t disappoint us.”

The only problems Lucio could think of were the sums his maths tutor, Bryson, made him do every other morning. Bryson had announced they would begin to cover subtraction soon. Was Father talking about helping him with his assignments?

“I won’t, Father,” Lucio said earnestly.

Draco looked at a moving photograph of Hermione he had, partially covered on his desk. In it, she was outside, framed by the sun, wearing that green gown he loved. She hadn’t realized he’d had the camera out. He’d called her name and when she looked behind herself, caught him there waiting; her expression looping infinitely from curiosity into annoyance and suspicion. Several more similar photographs were hidden in his desk drawers. Most of them were of her nude. In each one, her face was red with discomfort and resentment, and she always turned away, but he didn’t mind, because it always gave him full view of her perfect body.

“You must learn to take what you want,” he said, and Lucio watched him studiously. “A Malfoy does not ask permission nor forgiveness. I took your mother because she is my equal and I wanted no one else to have her. I have made her mine and she knows it. She would rather have you be compassionate and kind. I want you to be ruthless and opportunistic. I want you to become as great as I am, someday.”

Father did have a lot of friends, Lucio had to admit. Lucio wanted to make him proud.

“Do you understand me, Lucio?” Draco asked, raising his brows. “I know you’re young. But as you grow older, I’ll teach you what you need to know.”

“Will you teach me how to play Quidditch?” Lucio asked, perking up.

Draco grinned. “Of course. You’ll be the top Seeker at whichever school you go to.”

A/N:

Sorry I haven’t been clearer on this but Draco and Hermione are both 25 years old at this point. Draco kidnapped Hermione when they were both 18-19 and Hermione had Lucio when she was 21. I’m really bad at math so I’m probably getting this timeline all wrong.

3. Birthday Gifts

Updates will continue to be slow! My main focus right now is Strange Mercy, and my writing schedule has slowed down recently. For all updates and other information, please feel free to peruse my new blog! You can find the link in my profile.

Reviews are always welcome and encouraged!

Three.

Draco stretched and pulled the sheets from his body, relishing the cool air of the bedroom washing over him. Light streamed in from the half-covered windows, and it illuminated the witch's figure beside him most favorably. He admired it for a moment, before reaching out and hooking an arm around her waist and settling in closer to her until they were pressed together.

She slept on, oblivious. Draco brushed her hair from her face and pushed it away from her neck, trailing his lips over her soft, heated skin. She shifted, but didn't wake. Her breathing was still deep.

"Good morning," he murmured softly, and kissed her neck.

Her eyes opened at last. She sighed.

He was so fortunate, to have his wife. He couldn't imagine not being with her. Had he left her alone, she would have married Potter. And they would have their children and live their happy, sad little lives together. The thought filled him with contempt. Potter would have always been unhappy, searching for what he had already lost. Hermione would have been wasted with him. He couldn't let that happen. Here, she had everything she could ever want. A beautiful son, a powerful husband, wealth beyond what she was used to.

And I have her.

Nothing else mattered.

But the power does help.

He kissed her neck again, trailing them up to her cheek. Hermione stared at the wall.

"Good morning."

Draco ran his hands over her form, groping now and then playfully, but stopped abruptly, and rose from the bed to dress.

When he emerged from the shower she had sat up and dressed as well, slipping on the gown he had set out for her the night before. It was black and with a long skirt, plain enough that she wasn't immediately uncomfortable when putting it on, but the neckline still bared more than she would have liked to show.

He watched her as she pulled her hair into a knot at the back of her head, staring into the mirror, studiously ignoring him.

“No,” he said. “Leave it down.”

He watched as her jaw clenched ever so slightly, and after a pause, she let it all down again.

He came up behind her, half-dressed, holding his robes. Hermione turned, and helped him into them.

He kissed her. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, my Lord.”

He motioned for her to turn, and she did obediently, watching their reflections as he swept her hair back from her chest and shoulders and pulled it to the side.

“Do you know what day it is today?” he asked, staring at her through the mirror. His hands rested lightly on her shoulders.

She nodded. His fingers traced her clavicle slowly.

“I have a surprise for you,” he said into her ear. She shivered.

“What is it?” she asked, sounding more wary than curious.

“You’ll see.”

She watched with growing distaste as he drew his finger across her neck slowly. In its wake, a thin chain of small, brilliant emeralds formed a choker around her neck. She felt it clasp snugly at the back of her neck and turned to face him.

“Do you like it?” he asked.

“You know I don’t like necklaces,” she said carefully. Already, she was too aware of how close it fit around her neck, how the edges of the stones might dig into her flesh.

Draco kissed her forehead. “Indulge me, sweetheart.”

Hermione wrapped her arms around him reluctantly. “Thank you. Happy birthday, Draco.”

He smiled, and kissed her.

Lucio joined them for breakfast, cheerful as ever, babbling about a frog he had found outside his window that morning. He played with banging his spoon against his plate as he spoke, and Hermione listened patiently. Draco continued to eat, making sympathetic noises as his son occasionally engaged him with his story.

“Darling, don’t bang your spoon like that,” Hermione said, placing her hand on Lucio’s arm. “It hurts my ears.”

Lucio released the spoon and set it down by his water.

“Sorry, mummy.”

"It's alright, my love. Now finish your fruit."

She could feel Draco's stare on her.

"I don't like grapefruit," Lucio said, frowning.

"It's good for you," Draco said, as he ate a piece of it from his own plate. "See? Mm."

Lucio giggled, but remained fast.

"I don't want to eat it, daddy."

Draco wiped his mouth with a napkin. "If you don't eat it, you can't play outside with your broom today."

Lucio stared glumly at the slices of grapefruit on his plate for a moment. Then he turned to Hermione.

"But I don't like how it tastes!"

Hermione could sense Draco's impatience rising, and hurried to resolve the situation.

"Look," she said, and took one of the slices. "I'll eat one, and you eat the other, okay? But that means later you'll have more vegetables on your plate."

Lucio, relieved to have evaded the detested grapefruit, at least, saw no problem with this.

"Okay," he said cheerfully, and ate the remaining slice, making a face at its taste. "Can I go outside now?"

"Not until you've said happy birthday to daddy," Hermione reminded him, and Lucio ran dutifully to his father and threw his arms around him.

"Happy birthday, daddy!" he said, giggling as Draco picked him up off his feet and threw him into the air.

Hermione forced herself to watch. How normal a family they looked on the surface. Sometimes, she found herself wishing it was all real, that it was better than living out the reality.

"Thank you, love," Draco said, grinning as he put him back down. 'Pansy,' he called. She appeared at the door almost instantly. "He'll be playing outside. Watch over him, and make sure he puts on a jumper when it gets colder."

"Yes, my Lord." Pansy smiled at Lucio and held out her hand. Lucio ran over to her, took it, and they left the room.

Draco waved a hand at the table, and its contents vanished. Hermione was getting up too, about to inquire whether he had any business to attend to that morning, to gauge whether she would be able to spend her day alone, which she very much wanted.

Draco approached her, and held out his arm.

"Are you ready for your surprise?"

Hermione frowned. Her hand touched her new choker. "I thought this was it."

Draco took her around the waist. "That's only part of it, sweetheart. Come with me."

Draco's arm around her waist was restrictive, not allowing for much movement other than walking. Hermione wanted to pull it away and leave, as she was sure he wouldn't like what he was going to show her, judging by the choker.

They came up to the library, and he led her inside.

Hermione's eyes caught on a thin, brown-haired man standing by the largest windows. He was not one of Draco's followers, she could tell by his lack of gilded robes. There was a rather large suitcase standing on the floor beside him. He bowed as she and Draco neared.

"My Lord," he said.

Draco acknowledged the bow with a nod of his head.

"Falkner. I'm glad you could make it so early."

The man was tall, but not as tall as Draco. He had a pleasant, square-shaped face and tired, restless brown eyes. His hair was short and a shadow of a beard ran long his jaw. Hermione could sense his uncertainty.

He frequently looked towards Hermione, even as he addressed Draco. Hermione saw he wore plain clothes underneath his robe, and appeared exceedingly nervous.

"I am honored to be of service to you, my Lord—most honored."

Draco presented Hermione to him.

"This is Hermione, my wife."

Still, that smugness in his words. Would it ever go away? Hermione bit the inside of her cheek.

Hermione held out her hand, as Draco had taught her to do, fighting the self-loathing that filled her upon acting. Falkner bent low, took it, and kissed it.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, my Lady."

"May I ask how you know my husband?" Hermione asked.

Falkner began to answer, but Draco cut him off.

"A friend of a friend," he said dismissively. "We met about a month ago, out hunting."

Falkner had gone pale, but nodded. Hermione watched it all keenly, knowing Draco was lying.

"You go hunting so often," she said to Draco with a small smile. "One day, I'll go with you."

"You saw the scar I got," he reminded her. 'I won't let you put yourself in harm's way.' He turned to Falkner and gestured towards his suitcase. "Set up your things. Let me know if there's anything you need."

Falkner gave a hurried bow. "Of course, of course." He went to the suitcase and opened it, hunched low so that Hermione couldn't see what lay inside.

“What’s happening?” she asked Draco.

He cupped her face and kissed her. “He’s going to paint your likeness for me. I’ve commissioned him, you see.”

“Oh.” She didn’t like the thought of that at all.

“There’ll be one of each of us individually,” he continued. ‘You, Lucio, and I.’ He brushed her lower lip with his thumb. “One of us, together. And one of all three of us.”

Hermione was staring at Falkner, still rummaging in his suitcase. “I hope you’re paying him well.”

Draco grinned. “He certainly won’t starve.”

Falkner had stood and assembled a tall wooden easel by the window, in front and to the side of Hermione’s favorite chaise.

Draco had gone over to look at his paints. He was frowning.

“This is what you’ve been using?” he asked.

Falkner had brought out a stretched canvas from within a satchel Hermione had not seen, and restored to its regular size. It was almost as tall as him. That explained why the easel looked much bulkier compared to ones she’d seen in the past.

“Yes, my Lord. It is the best I can afford, but I’m confident I can deliver a beautiful portrait to your liking.”

Draco raised a brow. “Really.”

“I have won awards in the past for my work, my Lord,” he said, settling the heavy oversized canvas onto the easel. “And those works were made with these very same paints.”

“I have no doubt of your skill, as I’ve seen it myself,” Draco replied. “But I want nothing but the best for these.” He snapped his fingers, and their only House Elf, Toffee, appeared. She wore a plain pillowcase that was old, but well cared for.

Toffee bowed low. “Yes, Master?”

“Go to Diagon Alley, and find an art supply shop,” Draco said. ‘Get an associate to help you pick out the best quality paint. Money is no issue. Have them send me a bill.’ He looked to Falkner, who appeared utterly taken aback. “Did you need anything else?”

“My Lord, please don’t trouble yourself—”

Draco sighed and took a long look at his suitcase. “Bring brushes, too. All the usual materials required for painting with oils. I want only the best. Bring them back as quickly as possible.”

“Right away, Master,” Toffee said, and disappeared with a CRACK.

“That gives us about twenty minutes,” Draco said, and held up a hand towards Falkner, who was about to speak. “If you can deliver me faithful portraits I’ll consider it an investment. I’m sure other members of my... court would be eager to hire you on, once I’ve finished with you.”

Falkner bowed again. "You're most generous, my Lord. Thank you."

"Do you have any samples of your work?" Hermione asked. She couldn't stop looking at that huge blank canvas. Why such a large scale? It would look so imposing when on a wall.

That's probably what Draco's after.

Falkner shook his head. "I'm afraid not, my Lady, but tomorrow I'll remember to bring some."

Draco, too, was staring at the canvas.

"Your friend John never mentioned you are a painter," he said. "I'll confess I was impressed with your work. I've always appreciated art but don't know much beyond looking at it."

"John is more of an acquaintance, my Lord. We met at a wedding." Falkner dropped a tube of paint and hurried to pick it back up.

"Did you study art in school?" Hermione asked.

Falkner was holding some of his old brushes in his hand.

"Yes, my Lady. Beauxbatons has many classes dedicated to teaching art and I took as many as I could, to the point that my grades in others suffered. I took classes in the muggle world, as well, every summer."

There was a knock at the door of the library, and they turned to see Pansy enter.

"My Lord, Nott is here to see you."

"Take him to the sitting room," Draco said. "I'll see him in a minute."

Pansy nodded, and disappeared.

Draco turned back to them. "Continue setting up," he ordered Falkner. "Hermione, sit at the chair and he'll direct you to an appropriate pose for the painting. I'll be back."

When the door had closed behind him, Hermione remained standing, but approached the now designated painting area. Falkner continued to hold tightly to his brushes.

"The carpet here is so fine," Falkner said, almost timidly, "I wouldn't want to ruin it with paint drippings, my Lady. Perhaps we could move to an area with no carpet?"

"I wouldn't care at all if they got ruined," Hermione admitted. "But you're right. Pansy," she called.

Pansy appeared behind her.

"Yes, my Lady?"

Hermione gestured to the carpet. "Could you cover this area with a plastic sheet or something to protect the carpet?"

"Of course. I'll see if we have some in the kitchen." Pansy Apparated away.

Falkner was staring at her curiously. He tried to switch expressions when Hermione looked at him, but was too slow, and she had already caught him.

“Did you have a question?” she asked.

“No—pardon me, my Lady, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“What’s your first name?” she asked.

“Martin, my Lady.” He bowed again.

There was a loud rustling sound, and they looked down to find that a long plastic sheet now covered the area they were standing on.

“Wouldn’t an Impervius have worked just as well?” Martin asked, and then flinched. “Apologies, my Lady. I didn’t mean to—it’s just that I usually use an Impervius charm to cover ground when I paint.”

“It’s alright,” Hermione said gently.

This was something else she would never get used to. The way everyone treated her now, as if she might strike them down merely for sneezing in her presence, it broke her heart. “An Impervius could have worked, but the spell has such a small radius I’d grow tired of casting it over and over again, considering the space you’re working in.”

“I might have done it myself, I wasn’t thinking,” Martin said. “Forgive me.”

“It’s really alright,” she said, smiling. Fear or not, it was always refreshing to speak to someone who didn’t mean her harm. There were some exceptions, of course—Pansy definitely would never hurt her, but if Draco ordered her to, she’d have no choice. “Shall I sit now?”

“Yes, please, my Lady.” Martin was picking palette knives out of the disorganized mess of his suitcase. Hermione sat on the chaise and watched him. He was young—couldn’t have been older than herself and Draco. But he had lines on his face and a bent posture that suggested he spent more time awake than asleep, and indoors, at that. Probably working on other paintings, or on his studies. Hermione felt a pang of jealousy.

Another loud *CRACK* signaled Toffee’s arrival. She bowed to Hermione and snapped her fingers.

A rather large pile of boxes appeared beside Martin’s easel. He scrambled backward, taken aback by the size of it.

“Does Mistress Hermione require anything?” Toffee asked Hermione.

“No. Thank you, Toffee.”

Toffee Apparated away again, and Martin put his hands on his hips, surveying the boxes with a bewildered look.

“I can’t accept all of this,” he muttered, shaking his head. “This is too much, my Lady.”

His voice almost echoed in the large library.

“Take it,” Hermione insisted. “My husband isn’t always so kind.”

Martin nodded absently. "Yes, I've heard stories..." He glanced nervously at her and said no more.

Hermione knew that look too well.

"If anything, it means he likes you," she said. But they both knew it was a lie.

Rather, he sees you can be useful to him.

"Good, it's all here."

Draco had entered the library. He joined them quickly. Martin began to open a few of the boxes and had unearthed many sets of paint and brown bottles filled with mediums.

"I expect that'll be enough."

"It's more than enough," Martin said, and bowed again. "I am extremely grateful, my Lord."

"I expect you to put it to good use." Draco went to Hermione. She met his eye and saw his frown.

"What's wrong?"

Draco covered her from Martin's view with his body, and waved his hand over her. Hermione looked down to find he'd changed out her dress for his favorite green one. She hadn't worn it since he'd fucked her against the wall weeks ago, when he'd returned home.

Draco held her chin in his hand, tilted her head upwards to meet his eye.

"I had to have you preserved forever in this dress," he said, and then stepped away.

Suddenly cold, Hermione rubbed at her arms. Martin had finished unboxing everything and had put on a new smock. He vanished the boxes by pointing his wand at them, and now held a piece of charcoal in his hand.

"I've got further business to attend to, if you're ready to begin," Draco said to Martin. He looked at Hermione. "Call Toffee or Pansy if you need anything. I'll be dropping in to check progress."

Hermione nodded.

Draco looked at Martin closely. "Heed my warnings and you'll have no need to worry."

The hairs on Hermione's arms prickled. "What warnings?"

"He can look all he wants to paint the picture," Draco said, his cold eyes smoldering as he watched her. "But you are mine, and if he touches you he'll lose both hands so he can't ever paint again."

Martin had gone white. Hermione had gone rigid in the chair, her cheeks both cold and hot with indignation. A vicious reply was poised on her lips and she had to clench her jaw tight to hold it within, or risk igniting Draco's wrath.

Draco, aware of both their reactions, continued without remorse. "But if you obey me and nothing goes amiss, I'll see to it your career as an artist will be wanting for nothing."

Understand?”

“Of course, my Lord,” Martin said, and bowed again. “I would never presume to act unfavorably towards my Lady.”

Draco’s look of haughtiness begged for Hermione’s fist to plow into it. “See to it you don’t.”

Draco left the room.

Hermione finally remembered to unclench her jaw. Martin was watching her nervously, and she hid the wavering of her expression by rubbing at her forehead.

“My Lord is very protective of you,” he said, and she knew he had seen her resentment towards her husband.

Hermione shook her head.

“He doesn’t like it when his things are tampered with,” she said quietly. She smoothed the silk on her thigh. Her fingers were trembling.

Martin looked as though he wanted to say something else but had changed his mind after a glance at the door revealed it was propped open. It had not been that way, before. He stepped behind his canvas and cleared his throat.

“Could you turn and face the window, my Lady?”

Hermione shifted on the chair awkwardly.

“You may take any pose as long as it’s comfortable, my Lady,” he said, watching, and the timid look of his eye had turned assessing. More confident. It was interesting to see. Hermione could see wheels turning in his head.

“You don’t always have to say that,” she said. She sat stiffly in the chair, not knowing what would make a proper pose. Draco would insist she hold her head high and square her shoulders, to look commanding. All things that didn’t feel like her.

“Pardon, my Lady?”

“That,” she said, fighting the internal cringe at the title. “I’d prefer if you didn’t use it so often.”

“Oh... of course, my—” he caught himself and nodded. “Of course. If that’s what you want.”

Hermione gave him a small smile. “Thank you. You can use it as much as you like when Draco is present, since that’s what he wants to hear. I prefer being called by my name.”

Martin looked unsure. “Of course.” He stepped back towards the canvas. “Could you move your left arm to the left?”

An hour later, Martin had finished a rudimentary sketch. He asked Hermione what she thought of it, and she stood, stretched, and went to see it.

The sketch was minimal, with some shading but enough structure to find herself seated at the chair, the splendid library around her. Her drawn self sat with her feet on the ground, as if she were seated in a regular chair, mostly supported with her left arm while her right sat in her lap.

“Do you approve?” Martin asked. His hands were grey and blackened with charcoal. He kept at least three feet of space between them.

Hermione, who’d never had much skill in the arts, thought it was good enough to frame and hang there and then. She told him so, and he smiled.

“The pose is wrong.”

Draco approached them from behind, frowning at the canvas.

“How so, my Lord?” Martin asked, his face pale again.

“She looks too stiff. You’re supposed to lie back on the chaise, my love,” he said, turning to look at Hermione. “Or at least rest against it.”

“I’d have fallen asleep,” Hermione said, trying to smile. Martin looked as if he expected to be executed on the spot.

“That’s alright, so long as you don’t move, my Lady,” Martin replied, his adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed.

Draco held his hand out to Hermione. “Come.”

She met his eye angrily. He stared at her, blank-faced, expectant.

Fuck you.

Hermione ignored him and went to the chair. She could sense Draco’s temper spike and felt her stomach drop, but didn’t care. She would not allow him to lead her around like some sort of trained pet. She detested it more than anything, and it was always ten times worse when he chose to do it in front of someone else.

He reached the chaise before she did, and moved it so that it faced the canvas at a forty-five degree angle rather than head on from the front. He stared hard at her, his eyes alight with that look that promised retribution. He was holding back a smile. She could sense it more than see it.

His unspoken command hung in the air between them. She would have liked nothing more than to leave the room and leave him there with that stupid cold look in his eyes, but what would she do when he inevitably came after her and punished her?

Nothing.

Always, that answer. She was sick of it.

He always loves it when you fight back. It just means he gets to break you all over again.

Hate raised gooseflesh all along her arms. She fought a shudder.

She sat down stiffly, unable to meet Martin’s ashen expression.

From behind, Draco grabbed her by the nape of her neck and her waist. She could feel his hot breath against her skin. Her heart pounded.

“Lie back,” he said, and she obeyed, coming to rest against the wall of the chaise. “On your side.”

“Bring your legs up and bend them.”

She obeyed. Her teeth were set so tightly together, she would not be surprised if they shattered.

He took her arm and bent it, set it down by her front so her palm was pressed against the leather. Her breasts were pressed together, and through the deep neckline and thin fabric, left little to the imagination.

A tear broke free of her restraint and slid down her cheek. He grabbed her by the ankle and pulled gently on her leg so it was slightly more extended than the other. Her skirt, trapped beneath her, stayed put so that most of her leg and half of the other were exposed.

Her hair was in his hands, and he pulled most of it behind her back, arranged some of it to fan over her body, but not in a manner that obstructed too much from view.

He stepped in front of her now, and crouched. Now, his anger was apparent. She met his gaze defiantly, and he reached out, grabbed her by the throat and brought her forward until she was perilously close to falling off entirely, and crushed his lips against hers.

“You know it only excites me every time you defy me,” he murmured. He gave her bottom lip a sharp bite and she gasped, but it was muffled quickly by his tongue sliding into her mouth. His hand was squeezing her breast, hard enough to make her arch away.

His tongue tracked along her lip and he kissed her again like he wanted to imprint his own lips onto hers, his mouth moving feverishly, as if he couldn’t get enough.

When he finally let her go she coughed, her face crimson, her lips ravaged, tender and swollen.

He stood again and turned to Martin, who looked as though he wished he could Apparate away that second.

“I want you to capture her exactly as she looks now,” Draco said. “Even if she cries.”

He turned to Hermione again and met her eye calmly. His own lips were flushed, wet with her taste.

He didn’t have to say anything. She understood. Hermione righted herself and assumed the pose he had put her in, rage boiling her blood.

Draco left immediately, and she fixed her eyes on the wall on the far side of the room.

Martin stood there, frozen, for a second or two, and when the shock and distaste had sunk in, along with the apparent realization there was nothing he could do, he pointed his wand at his canvas, muttered an *Evanesco*, took his charcoal, and began to draw anew.

Hermione kept her eyes open until her eyes had gone dry.

Dinner was almost completely silent. Lucio had fashioned himself a wand out of a stick he'd found outside. It lay beside his plate and he pushed around his vegetables, frowning.

Hermione caught his eye, smiled, and gave the broccoli a pointed look. His frown turned deeper.

Draco wouldn't even look at her. He stared straight ahead, eating silently. He had taken off his robes and underneath, wore a regular suit. He'd taken the jacket off to eat, and rolled up the sleeves. Hermione watched him cut his meat out of her peripheral vision; tense, waiting for when he would decide to speak.

"Daddy told me you're making a painting," Lucio said. "I didn't know you could paint."

Draco put down his knife and smiled. "Neither of us can. Well, I wouldn't be surprised if your mother could. She would learn instantly, I think. I hired a man to paint a picture of your mother."

"I want to learn how to paint," Lucio announced. "I want to paint you, too."

Hermione laughed and held his hand. "Of course, you can, sweetheart."

Draco wiped his mouth with a napkin. "Your time is better spent focusing on your schoolwork."

Lucio's sweet little face looked lost. "But I'm not in school, father."

"Soon, you will be. It's important that you learn as much as you can, now, so you'll be more advanced than the others. You can worry about painting later."

Lucio's crestfallen expression stirred Hermione's heart.

She looked at Draco. "He has plenty of time to learn now," she said.

Draco didn't look at her. "He'll learn what I say he can learn."

Unhappy, Lucio stared down at his plate. Hermione put her fork down. A headache was building behind her temples.

"Eat your vegetables, Lucio," Draco said. "You promised your mother you would this morning."

Still upset, Lucio banged his fork against his plate. "But I don't *like* them!"

"I don't want to hear you whine," Draco said coldly. "I want to see you eat."

Lucio rubbed at his eye with a little fist. He took one piece of broccoli and ate it, his face miserable.

Hermione squeezed his hand. "It might not taste good, but it's good for you. They'll help you grow strong and healthy."

"Do I have to eat them *all*?"

"Yes," Draco said.

Lucio sniffed and ate the last two together, swallowing hastily.

“Can I go now?”

Hermione stood and went to him, wrapped her arms around him and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“Get ready for bed, okay?”

“Ok, mummy.”

Draco summoned Pansy, who took Lucio upstairs to ready for bed.

Draco was still seated at the table. His eyes were on her now, but he hadn’t said anything. Hermione, unwilling to bear his silence further, decided it was time to leave.

As she neared the door, Draco spoke.

“Come here, Hermione.”

She stopped short. She could sense what was coming; could sense the malice reaching out towards her from him like tendrils.

“I won’t say it again.”

She went to him.

Draco pushed his hair back and stood.

“I’d wondered if you were having trouble hearing,” he said. “I see there’s no issue.”

She crossed her arms. “You know I hate the way you treat me, like I’m there to do your bidding. I’m not a dog who’ll follow your every damn order.”

“Would you rather I had grabbed you without saying anything and led you to the chair?”

“It’s the same, either way,” Hermione snapped. “I never have a choice.”

Draco stepped closer. “It’s your choice how much you’ll allow yourself to be humiliated. I wouldn’t have ordered you like that if you’d come to me in the first place.”

Hermione scoffed.

“Do you have any *idea* how it feels to be called a lady and treated the way you have them treat me like I’m royalty, and then have them all watch when you treat me like I’m nothing better than a slave? Every time I hear them say it, it’s like they’re mocking me.”

“They wouldn’t dare mock you,” he said. ‘They know you answer only to me.’ He grabbed her arms and pulled her close. “A powerful witch, at my side, in my bed. I’d have no one else.”

“I’m no better than a bowtruckle here,” she replied angrily. “You want them to respect me. How can they, when I can’t even use magic?”

“You don’t need it,” he said. He led her to the table and bent her over it. Luckily, it had already been cleared, or Hermione would have found herself elbow-deep in the remnants of their dinner.

She was still wearing the green gown. Draco pushed the skirt up, running his hands over her legs. She heard the zip of his fly. Hermione braced herself on the table. His fingers stroked her labia, but it wasn't enough. He muttered a spell to add lubrication.

"I'm all you need," Draco said, and pushed inside her, pushing her body into the table. Hermione winced.

"I need my *magic* back," Hermione said. "You don't get to decide what's good for me. Were you planning on keeping me without it until I die?"

"I was waiting for you to prove you deserved it back," he said, groaning softly. His hand pushed at her thigh. "Spread your legs."

She went tense underneath him. "I'm supposed to *earn* it?"

He gave a hard thrust. Hermione bit back a whimper. "If you hadn't kept running away you'd have got it back a while ago."

"Liar."

He smiled. "If you continue to behave and not provoke me like this, you might get it back sooner."

The table scraped against the floor loudly under the force of his thrusts. Hermione clenched her jaw.

"I wasn't trying to provoke anything. I was angry. You can't just treat me the way you do every day and expect me to not feel about it in some form or other."

"You promised you would adapt," he reminded her coolly. His hands dug into her hips.

"I'm not a machine, Draco, I'm not like you!"

He slowed, ran his hand along her back, his hand entwining gently in her hair.

"No," he admitted, his voice quiet. "You're not. I forget, sometimes. You're still soft."

Hermione said nothing, gripping the side of the table.

He resumed thrusting, almost thoughtfully, and when he finally finished, he spelled away his mess and helped her stand. Face red, Hermione shoved her skirt back down. He tucked himself back into his trousers.

"If you'll be patient with me, I'll be patient with you," he said. "I don't want you to feel lesser to me."

"I always will, so long as I'm kept here against my will." She said, fighting the urge to glare at him. "You know that, and you know what the solution is."

His eyes were cold, inscrutable. "I do. I've told you before and I'll tell you again: I'm not letting you free."

Hermione had expected this reply. She had lost count of how many times he had told her that, by now. The sting had faded long ago, but morphed into resentment and hate.

"If having your magic back will help ease your mind, then you'll have it," he said, reaching forward to wrap her in his arms. "You're right—you are my wife—you should be as feared as I am."

"I don't want anybody to fear me," she said, frowning.

"They do, regardless, when they see you at my side. They know you aren't just some ordinary witch."

Hermione looked at him doubtfully. "You don't think I'm ordinary."

His hand came up to smooth her hair. "I've always known you weren't, just like you knew that about me, sweetheart."

I always knew you were an immeasurable, egotistical prick.

"When will I get my magic back?"

Draco smiled again. His hands had come up to cup her neck between them. His thumbs idly played with the gems nestled there. "Once you prove yourself as obedient as you promised me you'd be when you spared Longbottom's life. You know I don't mind when you show me your fire. When you defy me in front of the ones I command, however, is where I have a problem."

"When you remember to treat me like an actual human being, and your *wife*, rather than some slave who happens to wear your ring, I'll do my best to curtsy and smile and act like a good hostess," Hermione snapped.

"*They* bow to you, Hermione," he said sharply. "Never forget that."

"I don't want anyone to bow to me!"

"Did you want your magic back, or not?" he asked, impatient. "I'm not asking for much, Hermione. I could have just Imperiused you and denied you the *possibility* of getting it back, altogether, but you don't want that, do you?"

Hermione's blood ran cold.

"No."

"Then you'll do as I say, or I won't be interested in having this conversation again."

He kissed her cheek, and left. Cold and furious, Hermione stood there for a moment, her mind already buzzing with a hundred and one thoughts on the first thing she might do when she got her magic back.

So he wanted to play it his way. Fine. She was used to it. She didn't like it, but she would play. She knew without a doubt that he would use this to his advantage to get what he wanted, even humiliate her a little further, but she didn't care. If there was even the slightest possibility that she could use magic again, she would take it.

And I'll win.

4. Trials

An explicit chapter, ye be warned. Sorry for the delay, everyone. Please leave a review, if you can? I'd really appreciate it.

Four.

Draco straddled his wife, his hands tight around her waist. Her smooth, hot skin was like the welcome of a hot bath after a tiresome day. Her long, beautiful hair spread over her back; he wanted to bunch it in his fist and pull on it hard. He had to refrain from doing so—it would be a rude awakening, and she was about to receive one anyhow, but he didn't want her to be *too* furious upon waking. His wife had a hot little temper, and though he enjoyed it very much, he wasn't in the mood for starting off the day with too much negativity.

He settled himself in between her legs, one hand on her ass, the other on his hard cock. His body thrummed with anticipation, the urge to push, to claim.

Unaware, his wife continued to sleep, her head nestled in her arms on her pillow. Her pale, creamy skin was like marble in the morning light—he spread her legs apart wider, traced a finger or two over her cleft, savoring her heat. He worked her there for a moment, dipping in and out, stroking her clitoris until she began to burn hotter and he felt his fingers become coated with her slickness. He worked her slowly, carefully, so that she wouldn't wake.

That she was craving him was evident—she twitched now and then through her sleep, and her arousal was an aphrodisiac wine that continued to flow. He felt her walls begin to twitch and clamp, searching for something that wasn't there.

Yet.

He pushed in slowly, watching greedily as her lips wrapped around him, the way he disappeared inside her, inch by inch.

She shifted but didn't wake. A long, quiet breath emanated from her. Draco squeezed her ass again, pulling at her cheek to accommodate him, groaning in pleasure, still pushing until he had accommodated his entire length inside her exquisite heat. He had to stop for a moment before starting to thrust, to calm his breathing, worried he might spend himself inside her too quickly. He took a moment to purview her body again, the way she was displayed before him. Her muscles were still clamping around him slowly, urging movement, seeking pleasure. Draco bit his lip to keep from hissing too loudly. He let out a harsh breath and gave a small thrust, rocking his hips against hers, feeling pleasure ripple through him.

Perfect.

He pulled back and did it again. Her muscles continued to pull at him, reluctant to have him withdraw.

He had put her under a sleeping charm before starting, upon her request. It was a regular habit of his to wake her up wanting sex, or for her to wake up with him already fucking her. She had always hated it and had almost had a breakdown the first time she had caught him doing it. He knew the reason why; she had no control over what happened to her body. If he decided one day he wanted her to get a piercing, or even brand her again, she couldn't say no. If he wanted to fuck her in front of his followers, she had no other option but to bear it, or enjoy it. She'd said she didn't want to be woken up, so he was allowed to put her under whenever he wanted, and it worked perfectly, because he could get his release, and she wouldn't be disturbed.

And ever the thoughtful husband, he obliged.

Finally, he pulled farther back out and began to thrust, his need already so great that his thrusts were rough, moving the bed. She was slick, her body clenching around him, her beautiful, pert ass pressed against him.

It was never as satisfying as when she was awake. When asleep, she didn't make those lovely, gasping sounds or moans, or even her grunts and cries of pain that he loved so much. When he fucked her, he wanted to see how she reacted to him. Whether it was hate or pleasure, he didn't care.

Still, a body was a body, and there was none he preferred more than that of his wife, and his need was so great he carried on without further complaint. His hands were on her hips now, those perfect hips, and he was rutting into her, almost like an animal. He was moaning, sweat beading along his temples, his nerves flaring with pleasure. The sound of him plunging into her was the only sound in the room aside from his heavy breathing, but as he listened closer, he caught the sound of her labored breathing, the faintest of moans coming from her.

She began pulsing around him, her walls contracting and pulling him deeper. Her thighs quivered. Her face, even in slumber, was flushed and damp. Her mouth had opened slightly. He grinned, knowing she had climaxed.

He gripped her harder and pushed into her hard, his balls drawing tight as he emptied himself inside her.

"Fuck." He hissed, grinding his hips against her. Her pussy was red and swollen, still contracting around him slowly, holding him so tightly he had to thrust harder to sate his lust. She came again, her whole body drawing tight like a bowstring. He watched her, fascinated.

When he had finished he pulled out, watching as his seed slowly dripped out of her in thick trails.

"Finite Incantatem." He moved to her side, running a hand through his hair.

She awoke quickly, drawing in a deep breath and rolling onto her side, pushing her hair from her face, peering at him through sleep-dazed eyes. She saw him there, nude and his cock still slick from sex, and something went hard in her eyes. She started to sit up, but Draco held her down and kissed her deeply, one hand travelling down to her clitoris. He started to rub, and right away she had melted and was clenching her thighs together, making those little sounds into his mouth.

"Little minx," he said teasingly, slightly out of breath.

“Thank you, my Lord,” she recited dully. He grinned and kissed her again.

“Martin’s waiting in the library,” he said to her.

“What time is it?” she asked. Her eyes were screwed shut. A deeper flush tinted her cheeks. Her breaths were shallow. Draco took her peaked nipple in his mouth and sucked on it hard, laving his tongue over it in broad strokes.

“It’s almost ten,” he said, applying more pressure to her clit. Her hips jerked.

“Ah—” she gave a sharp gasp. He teased her nipple with a gentle grazing of his teeth. “Yes, just like that, Draco.”

He was getting hard again. Without needing to prompt her, she reached down and took his cock in her hand and began to stroke. Draco moaned.

“Some of my followers will be here later today, for a meeting,” he said. “They’re to eat dinner with us.”

She nodded, her eyes still shut tight, her brows furrowed. Her mouth in an ‘o’, she leaned forward, curling in on herself, breathing fast, her body quivering again. When it had passed, she went limp on the bed, her thighs falling apart.

“That’s enough,” she said, seeing the look in his eyes.

Draco crawled over her again without preamble and pushed inside her. Her head went back into her pillow.

He fucked her fast and hard, and she came again almost instantly, crying out. He came soon after, swearing out loud.

Hermione began to sit up. Draco made no move to magic his semen away, so she stood and went to the shower.

She hadn’t invited him, but he followed her inside anyhow, watching as she lathered shampoo into her hair. Her back was to him, but she had felt the cold draft of air that had snuck into the shower when he had entered. Draco washed himself beside her, watching now and then as she washed her body, rubbing the aromatic gels over her breasts and stomach. She knew he was watching, as always, and moved stiffly, never once looking in his direction.

He helped her wash her back, massaging the suds over her tense muscles, gently pulling her hair out of the way, running down to her ass, and then her legs. Her head was turned to the side, lowered, her eye not looking at him but at the ground as he trailed his way back up.

She finished before he did, and made no move to help him wash, which he had not expected anyway, but he caught her before she exited the shower and took her face in his hands and gave her a deep kiss.

“The green dress, and nothing else,” he reminded her, when they had pulled apart.

Resigned, still tired, she nodded, and left.

Martin was waiting in the library when she entered, cold and too aware of her nipples being visible through the green silk. She was sorely tempted to cross her arms and cover herself, but knew that if Draco saw her, he would command her to never be ashamed of her body.

I never was, until he said he couldn't control himself around me.

She'd only known Martin for one day, and could tell he was rather shy, but she'd been tricked before. One could never tell one's true nature after only one day of knowing them. Still, Draco's threat remained in the air around them, and she knew she would have little reason to worry.

Martin bowed deeply as she approached. "Good morning, my Lady."

Hermione opened her mouth, about to remind him gently about her preference not to be called that, when she stopped short, sensing Draco's presence behind her.

"Good morning," she replied, smiling.

"I hope we didn't keep you waiting too long," Draco said, after Martin had bowed to him as well.

"It was nothing, my Lord," Martin said. "I had time to continue work on the background of the painting."

Indeed, Hermione thought, as she looked around Martin and at the canvas. Already she could see the bookcases taking form, the deep tones of the walls and curtains already blocked in. No detail yet, but through the shapes and colors of things she could guess easily what they were. She stared at the edges of the canvas, avoiding looking at the sketch of herself, which Martin had not yet begun to paint.

"It looks wonderful," she said. "I'm always fascinated by seeing the process behind paintings."

Martin flushed. "It is a mess, my Lady, but I thank you."

Draco had wrapped his arm around Hermione's waist.

"I look forward to seeing the finished piece," he said.

"I only hope it will be worthy of your approval, my Lord. Shall we begin, my Lady?" Martin asked, gesturing to the chaise.

It was Draco who replied. "Of course." He led Hermione to the chaise and helped her arrange herself onto it, in the same pose he had chosen for her the day before. His hand brushed against her breast—their gazes connected; hers, wary, his, electric.

"We're expecting company tonight, for dinner," Draco said to Martin, his eyes still on Hermione's. "You're welcome to join us."

Martin, who had picked up his palette and brush, paused. "I thank you my Lord, but I'm afraid I can't. My father is sick, and I must visit him."

"Another time, perhaps," Draco said, finally turning from Hermione. "Send me his location. I'll arrange for a good Healer to see to him today."

“Thank you, my Lord.” Martin bowed again.

Draco stood, looming over Hermione. She stared back at him. He placed his hand on her cheek.

“I’ll come back to check progress soon,” he said, and left.

Posing for a portrait was really quite boring, Hermione decided, as she lay uncomfortably on the chaise.

Damn Draco and his spite.

Her hip ached from lying on her side for so long, and she longed to get up and walk around. The day was passing by, and she hadn’t seen Lucio since breakfast. As interesting as watching Martin paint might be, she couldn’t even see the painting when she was situated behind it, and she found it rather awkward to have Martin’s intense gaze on her as he glanced back and forth between her and the canvas. The library was mostly silent except for the sound of the furious brushstrokes he administered to the canvas, an occasional muttering to himself, the tinkling of palette-knife against his palette.

The odor of the turpentine was strong, but she didn’t mind it. Even the paints themselves had a strong odor to them, and she wondered for the first time if Draco had commissioned Martin for moving portraits. What made them move? She longed to ask but was unsure if she should speak for fear of interrupting Martin’s thought process.

“May I take a break?” Hermione asked, after ten more minutes had passed and the restlessness grew too great to bear. “I’m stiff and sore from lying down.”

Martin blinked and looked at her. He looked a little dazed, and again, she felt that sharp pang of jealousy at recognizing that feeling at once. Too many times, before being claimed by Draco, she’d done the same exact thing. Become wholly absorbed in a book, in writing a paper, in knitting, until something snapped her focus. She could still hear Harry and Ron’s voices as they teased her over it, as if she’d just seen them yesterday rather than years ago.

Her heart constricted.

“Of course, my La—sorry,” he said, putting down his palette. “I’m sure you don’t need my permission to stand and stretch.” He offered her a small smile.

Hermione winced internally. If Draco had heard, he would have chastised her. She could already hear his voice in her head.

‘Don’t ask for a break. Announce that you want one and take it. He can’t say no.’

She pushed it away as she stood, and stretched, craning her neck from side to side to work out the kinks. Martin was wiping his hands on a rag.

“If the pose is uncomfortable,” he said, “we could just start over with a new one.”

“No,” Hermione said quickly. “He wouldn’t like that.”

“My apologies, Hermione.” He said her name quickly, in a lower voice, as if afraid that someone might overhear it and report him to Draco.

“No reason to fret,” she said. “My husband simply likes things done his way.”

“I’m aware,” Martin said quietly. Quieter, still: “I was not keen on taking this job, initially.”

Hermione could only guess as to why. Had Draco forced him to do it?

“He is paying you, isn’t he?”

“A most generous sum,” Martin said. “More than all the paintings I’ve sold collectively. Generally, though, most of my clients are less frightening.” He smiled, as if telling a joke, but Hermione knew he meant it.

“He does take getting used to,” she admitted.

“I suppose I’ll have to,” he replied. “But I do enjoy working for you, my Lady.”

Hermione smiled. “I’ve never had my portrait taken, before.”

“With all respect, my Lady, some would consider that a crime.”

She walked around the area slowly. “I suppose my husband would, at least.”

“Hello, Mummy!”

She looked sharply to the library doors, where Pansy was escorting Lucio inside. He was waving a roll of parchment as he ran up to her, beaming. Pansy followed him, smiling.

“Look!” Lucio thrust the scroll up at her. Hermione took it, and then scooped him up into her arms.

“What is it, darling?” she asked.

He shook his head and pointed to the paper excitedly. “Just look!”

With some trouble, she opened the parchment and found a list of several arithmetic questions, all solved correctly. A red ink ‘100%’ was written neatly across the top.

“Well done!” Hermione said, kissing him on the cheek. “I’m sure Bryson is very pleased, too.”

“Very,” Pansy said. “He got to leave early, today.”

“Can I show Father, mummy?” Lucio asked. His little hands tapped her shoulders playfully.

“I’m not sure,” Hermione said. “He might be busy. Can you wait until dinner?”

“Okay,” Lucio said. He took back his maths paper from her and folded it carefully.

“Would you like to meet Martin?” Hermione asked, gesturing to Martin, who stood by the canvas, politely minding his own business. “He’s an artist.”

Lucio’s blue eyes widened. “The painter?”

Hermione took his hand. "The very one!"

They walked over to Martin, who looked nervous. He bowed to them.

"Lucio, this is Martin Falkner. He'll be painting pictures of us."

"Really?" Lucio asked. He held his maths paper at his side like an important folio. "Is he going to paint Daddy, too?"

"Of course."

"It is an honor to meet you, little Lord," Martin said, smiling down at Lucio. "You look very much like your father."

"Can I see your painting?" Lucio asked, pointing to the large canvas.

"Of course," Martin said. "Right this way."

He and Lucio went to look at the painting. Lucio hurried before it eagerly, and then stood there, his face falling blank.

"It doesn't look like mummy."

The adults laughed. Lucio looked around, perplexed.

"I'm afraid I'm in trouble," Martin said, grinning, though she could sense his nervousness.

"It isn't done yet, my love," Hermione explained to Lucio. "Paintings take a lot of work and time to finish. It might not look like me now, but it will soon."

Lucio frowned. "Oh."

"There you are." Draco joined them in the library, having Apparated in silently. Hermione jumped as he appeared beside her, taking her hand in his. "I heard my son had news for me."

"Daddy!" Lucio showed him his paper.

"Excellent," Draco said, picking him up. "I knew you could do it."

"Bryson said I'm advanced for my age," Lucio said proudly, crossing his arms.

"I'd expect no less, if you have both your mother's and my brains in you," Draco said, grinning. "Pansy, I believe there's some chocolate gateau in the kitchens. Serve him a slice."

"Right away, my Lord." Pansy curtsied and took the exultant Lucio away.

"I'm sorry to cut into your painting time," Draco said to Martin. "Our guests are beginning to arrive."

"Forgive me, my Lord," Martin said, looking rather surprised as he looked down at his watch. "I'm afraid I lost track of time. We were taking a break, and I had the honor of meeting your son."

"Remember to send me your father's location," Draco said. He turned to Hermione. "Go upstairs and change."

She ignored the bite of anger at his command, and turned to Martin, who bowed again.

“Until tomorrow,” she said.

“Of course, my Lady.”

Waiting for her upstairs was a black gown. She slipped it on and moved about getting ready slowly, not wanting to go downstairs and dine with his followers. Luckily, it didn’t happen too often, but increasingly of late, they were coming over, unless Draco was away. Hermione hated it every time and wished they would never visit at all.

If anything, I suppose I should be grateful he doesn’t have me wear their robes.

His choker was still around her neck. She hated the feel of it against her throat, but, like the ring, couldn’t take it off.

Another display of ownership.

She shook her head and sighed.

The door opened, and Pansy entered.

“Anything in particular?” she asked.

“I don’t care,” Hermione said.

Pansy squeezed her shoulder gently, and led her to the vanity, where Hermione sat down in front of the mirror.

“Who’s here tonight?” she asked, as Pansy began to rub some sweet-smelling oil into her hair.

“Nott. Crabbe. Greengrass sisters. Goyle, but you know he’ll be late. I’m not sure who else. It’ll be a small gathering, tonight.”

That, at least, was a relief to hear.

“Is there a reason why they’re coming?” she asked.

“He hasn’t told me anything other than that.”

She would have stayed longer upstairs if she could. She hadn’t even needed that much time to get ready. Pansy had helped arrange her hair and she needed no other adjustments than to change her dress, but the ring on her finger seemed to emanate an odd sense of urgency, and she knew Draco was growing impatient.

Don’t keep him waiting.

Her palms were sweaty on the way to the dining room. Lucio would not be joining them. He usually never did, for those meetings. Draco had said he would when he was older.

At least the gown had long sleeves. That would keep her somewhat warm, in spite of the deep plunge between her breasts. She wiped her palms on her skirt and walked inside.

They were already seated, Draco included, but rose to greet her. They all bowed. Draco went to her, held out his hand, and when she took it, guided her to her seat beside his at the

head of the table.

Hermione felt their eyes on her and resisted the urge to shiver. She met them all coolly, her face carefully blank.

"It's good to see you, my Lady," Nott said. "I hope you are well." His eyes dipped down to glance at her breasts. Indignation flared inside her.

"Perfectly," she said, her voice curt.

The food was served, and they began to eat.

Although she had no appetite, Hermione forced herself to eat, knowing that if she didn't, there would be questions, and perhaps a reprimand from Draco.

He was talking to Crabbe, who sat on his right. Crabbe sported a thick scar on his temple and a crooked nose, courtesy of some battle she hadn't been informed of.

Astoria Greengrass and her sister Daphne sat side by side, speaking to another follower who Hermione had seen once before but couldn't recall his name. The final two at the end of the table were older, and she very vaguely recognized them as having been some of Voldemort's original Death Eaters.

The blond one with the scowling, shrewd eyes and the thin lips was Dolohov. The round one with the jowls and the dark, beady eyes was Amicus. The thickly bearded one beside Daphne with the black, greying hair and large nose had to be Rodolphus Lestranger.

I wonder where his wife is.

She hadn't seen Bellatrix in some time.

It's better that way, she thought. Bellatrix had an infuriating habit of bringing Harry up every time she was around her, as if she knew how much it still hurt, or that it made Draco rougher at night, when they were alone together.

Rodolphus had caught her looking at him, and inclined his head, acknowledging her. She looked away.

Now and then, she missed Blaise. They hadn't even known each other that well, aside from him helping her escape. But a familiar face was a familiar face, and though some of these faces were familiar, and they acted polite enough, she desperately longed for one that didn't mean her ill.

"I'm glad you're all here," Draco said. "I haven't seen some of you in some time. I trust you'll have good news for me."

They nodded.

"Of course, my Lord," Amicus said in his ugly, hoarse voice. "I think you'll be very pleased."

Draco smiled thinly over his goblet of wine. "We'll see."

There was an awkward pause, and then Nott turned to Hermione.

"My Lord has mentioned you're having your likeness taken," he said.

Hermione glanced at Draco, who was smiling at her.

"It was his wish," she said, trying to smile. She felt Draco's hand on the nape of her neck, brushing over her skin.

"Such beauty can't go uncelebrated," he said, staring deep into her eyes. Hermione flushed with anger, and they chuckled.

"So modest," Nott said.

"May we see it, my Lord?" Astoria asked from the other end of the table, as she wiped at her mouth. "I'm sure it's wonderful."

"Of course it will be," Draco said, and finally dropped his hand from Hermione's neck. "Not until it's finished."

Hermione busied herself with eating her soup, overwhelmed by the urge to walk out of the room. She had sat through so many of these dinners, and each time she always felt like a hostage. They made banal conversation and hinted at what they were currently working towards, as Draco didn't quite trust her enough to hear everything just yet. She had actually found herself grateful. Of the things they let slip, or didn't care to censor, she figured she had heard enough to haunt her forever. The crimes and coverups, the corruption. The constant deaths. Every time she listened as keenly as she dared for a familiar name, but those cropped up rarely, now. She had been hopeful for a while, until the realization hit her that most of her friends had probably died years ago, at the last battle, when Draco had killed Harry, and she had got there too late.

But just in time to save Neville.

Her grip on her spoon tightened.

And where is he, now? Dead?

She hadn't heard any mention of his name since that day. Draco had said he'd kept his word, and not gone after him, but she didn't know if she could trust him. For every time he made a promise like that, he went and broke the non-existent trust she had in him in some other gruesome way.

"Where's Bella tonight?" Crabbe asked.

Rodolphus shrugged. "Looking over some new captives. The Snatchers found a group of would-be escapees over by the ruins."

Hermione frowned.

Daphne was shaking her head. "I don't envy them at all. They're probably wishing they got Fenrir, instead. I bet they're sorry they dared to trespass, now."

Draco took a long drink. "If they behave, they won't have anything to be sorry about."

"This is the second time, my Lord," Crabbe said, frowning. "There's nothing there, now. What are they looking for?"

"There's nothing there to interest them," Draco said curtly, and Hermione understood that to mean Crabbe had said too much, and the conversation was over.

The rest of the dinner went by slowly. Nothing special happened, except for Draco's hand slithering into her lap during dessert. He had stroked her thigh slowly, enough to make it warm, and she had sat through it as still as stone, her heart pounding, fearing his next move.

The others had noticed. The men's eyes had slid towards them, and then away, as if it was nothing, although some of them lingered for a fraction longer. The two sisters had pretended not to see it at all, and carried on their conversation with Nott, as if it was all ordinary. And Hermione had sat there, stiff with dread, praying he would not go further, as she knew he wanted to do, and had insinuated before.

He's testing me again.

When he'd finally pulled back his hand, her thigh was hot, and the silk of her dress clung to her bare thigh, so close to the joining of her legs. She was pale, sweating, aware of their gazes on her.

He stood from the table, held his hand out to her to help her up. The others also stood at once.

"Goodnight, my love," he said, and leaned in to kiss her cheek. "Go check on our son and wait for me upstairs."

She nodded, her resentment clogging her throat to the point she couldn't form words. His kiss was chaste and proper, as though he hadn't been stroking her vulva through her dress only moments before. The rest of them bowed and bid her good sleep, and she forced herself to walk out of the room, rather than run.

She was still sweating when she entered the corridor, her hair in disarray around her temples. She pushed it away, her breath short, tears stinging at her eyes.

Don't let them hear.

She hurried on, stumbling over herself in her haste to remove herself from their presence as quickly as possible.

She was nothing but a show pony to them. Draco had said as much repeatedly over the years.

"My perfect witch, tamed and bedded."

How often he liked to say he'd tamed her.

He's wrong.

If anything, sometimes she felt wilder in her rage than she'd remembered being before her capture.

She was sick of it. He still kept his plans from her and her knowledge of the outside world was still limited, confined only to what he thought fit for her to know, although he gradually let her become to some information, but it still wasn't enough. As to the state and wellbeing of the world, she knew only as far as the small towns that surrounded them. Snippets of the wizard world. Nothing on the Muggles.

For all she knew, he might have annihilated everyone else except for their little family and his followers. It was a silly thought, and for a moment, she wondered if given the chance, he would take it.

Her thigh was growing cold now from the rush of air against it her movements provided. He'd threatened more than once to fuck her in front of his followers in order to get her to behave, and she'd never seen it as anything more than a threat. But as of late, his hands had begun to wander, not unlike tonight, and that doubt had turned into a very real fear.

He had embarrassed her in front of them all before, countless times. Kissing, groping, making her sit in his lap, dressing her in clothes meant to tantalize, calling her pet names and treating her affectionately, as if he didn't rape her in their bed every other night. As if he hadn't beaten her to near unconsciousness on several occasions. As if he hadn't drugged her in order to gain his sick pleasure.

Her stomach was turning.

Once, he had been angry with her for some reason she couldn't remember any more, but she could recall the punishment still. He'd made her sit on her knees between his legs all during a meeting with his followers, and had her wear a low-cut gown. She'd sat there biting her tongue to keep from biting *him*, as he'd cast an enchantment to keep her from hearing everything they said, whether it was important or not. He'd made her lean back against him and every now and then he'd feed her something on her plate, as though she were a helpless child who couldn't feed itself. His followers had acted as if she weren't there, but now and then, when she dared look at them, she'd catch one or two of them staring at her breasts.

They called her 'lady'. She had done nothing to deserve it but be forced into marriage. It was a title she'd never wanted and even now, wished fiercely that they would stop.

My name is Hermione Granger, and I didn't choose this life.

But what could she do?

She had behaved tonight. She had not lost her temper or defied him in any way. He must have noticed.

How long will I have to keep this up? She wondered, scowling. *How much until I get my power back?*

She'd already tried, countless times, to find a way how. She'd pored through her library and found nothing useful. She'd asked him questions, to which he'd given unsatisfactory answers. After her suicide attempt, the one that had spurred him into getting her pregnant, he had made an alteration to the ring's enchantments, that her ring could only be taken off when he was conscious and had given his approval. It had been a nasty shock for her to find out, the next time she had tried to escape. She'd waited until he was deeply asleep and had worked carefully to ensure success. Somehow, he'd known through his sleep what she'd tried to do and woken while she still had his hand around her finger, trying to pull the ring off. He had stared at her until she'd finally noticed and looked up, her face draining of color. He had done nothing but stare. She'd stopped moving, silently admitting defeat, and he'd wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer, his breath warming her hair, one hand lying flat and spread over her pregnant belly.

Knowing him, he would just string her along forever with the promise that she had *almost* earned her magic back, but not quite yet.

Once I get it back, will things change? Or will he restrict my magic so that it all stays the same?

She already knew the answer.

He always wanted too much. Too much of her time, too much of her attentions. Too much sex, sometimes to the point that she was raw and sore afterwards and practically had to beg for peace or healing before he touched her again.

But when I want something, it's nigh impossible.

She found Lucio with Pansy, as she helped him get ready for bed. He ran to her and hugged her, accidentally smearing toothpaste on her skirt. Hermione laughed, and bent down to kiss the top of his head. The smell of the toothpaste and the sound of his childish little laugh struck her, and she flashed back to when she'd been a child, and her mother and father had let her study their orthodontic props from their offices. Her father had made the model of the human jaws speak to her and lecture about the importance of proper oral hygiene, and she'd found it so unexpectedly silly that she couldn't help but laugh until there were tears in her eyes.

She'd wiped away the tears before Lucio could see them, but Pansy had noticed. She'd given her a curious look and Hermione shook her head to indicate she was okay, though her heart ached, and she suddenly wished for a long walk, but there were other matters to attend to.

She and Pansy tucked Lucio in, and he, tired from a long day full of lessons and exploring around the garden with Pansy, fell asleep almost instantly. Hermione, not much in the mood for talking, bid Pansy goodnight, and left for the bedroom.

She found Draco already there, sitting on the bed, taking off his shoes. His robes lay over the back of the chair by her vanity. He set down his shoes, and noting her arrival, looked up, his elbows perched on his knees. Their eyes met. He waited for her to move.

Hermione, steeling herself, walked to him, standing before him. He didn't rise, but grasped the front of her skirt and pulled her closer, until her could grab her by the hips, his warm, large hands spreading over her flesh and pressing in gently through the fabric. His head was almost between her breasts. He pulled her in and breathed in her scent. Hermione let her hands fall to his shoulders, stroking softly, mechanically. He sighed, and the flood of hot breath over her was almost welcome, but only because the room was cold.

As if he knew her thoughts, the fire sprang to life in the hearth, crackling loudly.

Hermione bent low and let her lips touch his. He responded passionately, his hands groping harder, his lips like a wildfire, intent to destroy. He let her go and grabbed her dress by the neckline and moving one hand down between them, pressed flush against her, he magically sheared her dress through and down the middle.

She had not worn anything underneath, as he liked it. At once his mouth was on her breast, pressing hot kisses to the stretch marks that had graced her skin there during her pregnancy. His thumb teased her other nipple, which was stiff more from the cold than his attentions to it.

His mouth wrapped around the tip of her breast and sucked, his tongue formed into a pointed tip and teased the bud until she arched against him, feeling a slickness at her core. His fingers reached down there and played with her clit, making her lean against him, gasping, reluctant need coiling inside her.

Flushed and panting, Hermione let him guide her onto the bed. He was sitting up against the headboard, his shirt open and exposing his muscled chest, his trousers already off, probably by magic. He had his hand around his erection, stroking himself lazily as he watched her, his light eyes watching her through lowered lids.

No order had to be made. She knew what to do.

Hermione went to him and sat astride his lap, her hands steadying herself on his shoulders. Draco's eyes stayed intent on her; he grabbed her by the sides of her face and kissed her deeply, his tongue sweeping over her bottom lip, as she guided herself down onto him.

At first contact she shuddered, both out of anticipation and revulsion. She continued to lower herself carefully until she had taken all of him, and he let his eyes close at last and moaned. He throbbed inside her. Hermione waited a moment for her body to relax. His size always guaranteed some sort of discomfort, however brief. She reached down with her fingers, closed her eyes, and played with herself, feeling herself clench around him. Draco moaned again, and his hips pushed up, earning himself a groan from her. His hands settled on her waist, thumbs pressing in, urging her to move.

Hermione grit her teeth.

Please him now, and destroy him later. She repeated it to herself like a mantra, even like a prayer.

She held on to his shoulders once more, and began to move.

A/N:

Thanks for reading!

5. Ruin

Five.

With Draco gone for a few days on undisclosed business, the atmosphere in the library had relaxed considerably. Hermione played soothing music from the phonograph in the library, and was able to spend more time with Lucio in the morning, before it was time to get to work on the painting. Martin muttered to himself now and then from behind the canvas, and Hermione had allowed her thoughts to stream undisturbed as she lay still on the chaise, nearly bored to tears.

Pansy and Lucio were outside, playing. They'd had a pleasant breakfast, with Pansy sitting between them rather than waiting on them, as was required when Draco was home. Hermione had suggested they take a picnic, and Lucio had immediately jumped onto the idea, taking his broomstick along with him. Hermione would have loved to go along with them had Martin not arrived shortly after, and though she liked his company, wished she could take a break from the painting, but didn't dare, knowing what Draco's opinion on that would be.

Two days prior, Lucio's lesson had ended early and Pansy had brought him into the library to visit her and Martin. Hermione had been delighted to see them, and, after having made sure she wasn't hindering Martin's painting progress, brought him up into her lap.

They'd chatted amiably and after a while Lucio slid from her lap to watch Martin paint. He had sat down behind the artist and with his legs crossed and his little fists propping his head up, he asked question after question, and Martin, with incredible patience, answered them all to Lucio's satisfaction.

The portrait painting was at the start of its second week of progress. Martin was unmarried, but tended to his father on weekends, so Draco had agreed to give him weekends off to travel to see his father. In the meantime, however, Hermione had grown comfortable with him, and although modeling for the portrait was still something she wasn't sure she liked, she found his quiet demeanor helped relax her, and they had talked about their scholastic careers and childhoods, books they'd read, both in and out of the muggle world.

It had only been about a week since Draco's birthday and the start of the painting, but already they had settled into a routine that Hermione found herself looking forward to.

This particular afternoon, she had enjoyed her breakfast, morning shower, and empty bed and come down to meet Martin, whom Pansy had already let in and was setting up his things. They had chatted for a bit, and then begun. The day was warmer than usual, and though the Manor was always cool on the inside, the wide windows had been uncovered and the sunny, cloudless sky made her feel hot just to look at it. She had slept well the night before but found herself dozing off as she sat utterly still, her head nodding as she kept waking up to find her posture drooping.

At some point she must have completely fallen asleep, but she was hardly aware of it, only aware of the warmth of the library, the soft music playing on the phonograph, and the muted

sound of Martin's brush meeting the canvas.

"My lady?"

A warm hand tapped her shoulder, and Hermione jolted in pain, snapping awake as her ring sent a bolt of pain down the length of her arm.

It had affected Martin too. He cursed aloud and staggered back, staring at her wide-eyed, a lock of hair falling across his face, a spot of paint speckling it. There was smudged charcoal along his jaw, and he still held his paintbrush in his non-dominant hand.

"F-forgive me, my Lady," he stammered, his face pale. His eyes darted toward the door. "I forgot—I didn't mean anything, I only meant to ask you to move your head, but you were asleep."

Hermione stood from the chaise, shaking her head to clear it. She felt dazed, her arm still tingling with the shock. She blinked, swallowed. The hairs on her arms stood on end.

"It's my fault," she said, her voice oddly calm. She gave him an unconvincing smile. "I shouldn't have fallen asleep. I'm sorry about—" she trailed off, and gestured to her arm.

Martin was staring at her ring, as if he could sense its malevolence. "Did he—" he looked around nervously, swallowing. "Did my Lord do that?"

She nodded and looked away.

At that, he didn't know what to say.

Piece by piece, he's starting to see how messed up this relationship is, she thought. And it happened every time, that when someone else saw it, it was like seeing through their eyes, being reminded again of what she had been through, but from an outside perspective.

"Let's take a break. May I see the progress?"

Martin gave a small bow. "I would be honored." His eyes lingered on her ring, his face blank.

Hermione hardly noticed as she neared the large canvas. Over the past several days, she had looked and looked at the canvas and seen all the early stages of the painting, from the underlying sketch to the blocking of colors, the beginning and completion of the library behind her.

By now the background was mostly complete. She sucked in a breath as she took it in.

"You have great skill."

Martin flushed. "Thank you, my Lady."

The colors were rich, he'd gotten the lighting just right—they started at noon every day, and he'd explained to her once that he mostly worked on the bookcases and the carpeted floor until the sun began to set, when its golden light began to stream heavily through the windows and cast a warmth all over the library. Then he began to really work, to make sure he captured the colors just right. He had started on her form from the bottom; the wooden gleaming legs of the chaise and then the plush brocaded velvet of the cushion on either side of her, then the folds and silk of her gown appearing as though he'd cut up bits from the actual dress itself

and attached them to the canvas. It looked so real she wanted to touch it, to reach out and feel the silk itself, but knowing that the canvas was still wet, she held her hands behind her back, lest impulse take over.

The bare foot of her half-painted self poked out from underneath her skirt. It was about the size of her open hand. She stepped closer to stare at it, at each of her toes painstakingly rendered in such detail—she turned to look at his palette and saw the mess of it; the mixed colors taking up every inch of the wide wooden surface, the brushes still scattered around it, some so fine they might only hold just one short hair.

“Don’t your hands or eyes ever hurt, painting such small details?” She asked. “It’s incredible.” Her eyes were on some of the painted books. He had even included titles, rendered in gold paint.

“From time to time,” Martin admitted. “We are taught in school certain stretches and methods of holding our utensils to limit strain and injury. It still happens, if we’re not careful.”

“And your eyes?”

“I haven’t had need of spectacles yet,” he said, the corner of his lip lifting. ‘I suppose one day, I’ll have to.’ He paused. “Your husband invited me to stay for dinner again, when he comes back.”

“Really?” She looked at him. “Will you?”

“I’m not sure,” he admitted. “If I may say so, Lady Hermione, I don’t much enjoy his presence.”

At this she bit back a laugh. “Many would say they feel the same, I’m afraid.”

I almost forgot what it feels like to banter with someone without malice. Someone who isn’t Pansy, anyhow.

“He sent a Healer to my father’s home,” Martin said. “He is now fully recovered, thanks to him.”

“That’s good to hear,” Hermione said sincerely, though inwardly she wondered why Draco had gone to so much trouble when he hardly even knew him aside from the commission.

He did say they’ve hunted together before. She frowned.

“If I may be brutally honest, I’m inclined to decline again,” Martin said in a whisper. “But I’m sure he would insist.”

“I’m sure he would,” Hermione said, then added. “Well, a friendly face at dinner would be nice, for once. I would be happy if you joined us.”

Martin bowed. “Then it would be my honor, my Lad—Hermione.” He looked down at his paint-spattered clothes. “I suppose I’ll have to go home and change, as well.”

“I think that would be best,” Hermione said.

Martin nodded, then glanced sidelong at her as he took off his smock and folded it over his arm. He glanced at his watch and then looked at her, his eyes full of warmth.

"I think that's it for today." He stretched, rubbed at his face with his hand.

Secretly relieved, Hermione smiled. "Until tomorrow, then."

If Draco were there, she would have extended her hand for him to bow over and kiss, but he wasn't, and they were allowed to drop the pretense of titles and decorum.

When he was gone, Hermione crossed her arms and paced around the library, worrying her lip between her teeth.

Pansy and Lucio were still outside. She thought of joining them but decided not to, not knowing the reason why. She wound her way through the rows and rows of bookshelves, her light footsteps the only sound in the room.

I should have asked Martin to stay. Just to have someone to talk to.

He was always eager to leave. She didn't blame him, especially after what had happened earlier. She smoothed her hand along her arm, wondering if Draco had known or even sensed that Martin had touched her.

If he knew, he was probably furious—how quickly would he take action? She had to do something. Martin might be in danger, knowing Draco's temperament.

Pansy could relay him a message—Hermione hurried outside, to the back of the manor, scanning the expanse of land for where she and Lucio might have gone, but found nothing but trees and plants swaying in the gentle wind.

It'll take me forever to find them, especially without magic.

"Toffee?"

The elf appeared at once, bowing low.

"What does Mistress require?"

"Find my son and Pansy. Please," she added as an afterthought.

"They is left to visit the village, Mistress," Toffee replied. "Master has sent word with permission for them to go."

Hermione frowned. "Why has no one told me?"

"Because I just arrived, sweetheart."

Arms wound around her from behind her and Hermione jumped, feeling Draco's lips nuzzle along her neck.

"Thank you, Toffee, that will be all."

She shivered.

"Very well, Master." Toffee said, and apparated away with a loud *crack* that reverberated around the library, and they were left alone.

"You're here early," Hermione said.

"Things wrapped up earlier than expected," he said, but he didn't sound pleased.

He stroked her arm, right where Martin had touched her.

Hermione swallowed.

So he knows.

"I fell asleep while he was painting," she said. "He was only trying to wake me up. He didn't mean anything, Draco."

"I know he didn't," Draco said. He let her go and came to stand in front of her. "I don't like, however, that he forgot himself and thought he could touch you after the explicit warning I gave him."

"I'm not your property, Draco. He's only a friend."

"That's not what he wants," Draco replied coolly. "I've seen his thoughts. He wants much, much more."

Hermione flushed. "And I'm the one who's leashed."

Draco arched a brow. "I could do it to him, too."

"You can't *own* and control everyone."

At that, he smiled wickedly. "I could, if I cared. But you're enough for me."

Hermione stared at him suspiciously. "You think I'm attracted to him."

"I'm only taking precautions, sweetheart."

"You're unbelievable," she said, shaking her head.

"*And you* made a deal, dearest," he said, his eyes going cold. "Remember yourself."

She went quiet, forcing her expression into one of blankness.

She *had* forgotten herself. It was so easy, when he was such a bastard. Her anger was like a whip, ready to be lashed out. It was hard to reign it in, sometimes.

But I'll have to learn to do it if I ever want my magic back.

Her fists unclenched.

Draco had watched her the whole time, his eyes nearly glowing with pride.

"My captive bird," he said softly, brushing her hair from her neck. Hermione closed her eyes and felt the weight of her hair, the heat of it vanish from her shoulder. His hand came up again and thumbed away the neckline of her gown, studded with garnets around the collar. She knew what he sought, and tilted her head so he could get a better look at the old scar his bite had left on her flesh. He stared at it for a long while, never saying a word, and she knew that he liked seeing her dressed in such a deep red, that it reminded him of the blood he took from her. She bore similar scars in other places now, but this was the one he treasured most though she couldn't say why.

"Enchanting, captive little bird," he repeated breathlessly, his voice like the rumbling of the earth before a storm, "whom I dragged from the sky."

His hand curled around her neck now, cupping it, holding her pulse in his palm. Hermione forced herself to stay still.

“And now who sings sweetly in my bed and yet still trembles when I come near.”

You say this, but it pleases you, she thought. It always has.

And so it was.

He’s got an ego the size of a Hungarian Horntail, she thought with distaste. Remember you put this leash on me since you couldn’t control me otherwise. You were afraid I’m stronger than you. Once this ring comes off, husband, I’ll wipe you off this earth.

Still, perhaps stoking that ego now and then might work to her advantage.

If he didn’t play fair from the beginning, then neither will I.

“Any creature would shake when a hunter approaches,” she said quietly. “It would be unnatural for me to welcome your proximity when I know you could very well eat me if you chose.”

“That I have, and will, *often*,” he said with a half smile. “Only remember that you agreed to behave, Hermione. I don’t mind your temper so much when it’s only you and I, but when it’s in front of others, the consequences will be harsh. I expect you to keep to it for your own sake.”

He knew the look of bitterness on her face, and try as she might she could not conceal it.

“I know,” was her stiff answer.

“Then greet your Lord husband as you should,” he said, his voice strong like the crack of a tree trunk splitting in half, cutting into her heart. Hermione had no choice but to obey.

He had dropped his arms from around her—Hermione reached upwards to bend his head closer to hers and before she could give it any more thought she pressed his mouth to hers, not gently, just as she knew he wanted it. His lips were cold and pliant but still—she teased his tongue with hers, wove her

fingers through his hair, pressed her breasts against him. She let her teeth scrape against his lips—his hot breath rushed over her.

He received it like a king, remaining cool and appearing unaffected, but she felt him shudder under her touch, his breath coming faster. His hands remained frozen at his side, his eyes half closed, watching her through a dazed film in his eyes. Hermione was running out of breath again, she made to break away but he wrenched her back quite suddenly, his nails forming red crescents on her skin—she gasped and he gave her that second to draw breath before his hands grabbed her by the cheeks and he crushed their mouths together in a rough kiss.

As always, regardless of their agreement, there was the instinct to pull away, which she struggled against now. Having sensed it, he decided he wouldn’t fault her for it, and that he rather liked it, as it showed her obedience. Draco smiled into the kiss, gave enough pressure to her lips to let her know he wanted her to open them, and she did, to his delight. He ignored the impulse to bite down on her tongue, and savored her taste like the richest, bitterest wine as

he swept his tongue against hers. Her cheeks were flushed and pressed between his hands, his kiss sucked little whimpers from her. He bit her lip and she jerked against him, a muffled moan of pain escaping her throat, and he broke the kiss.

Face prettily flushed, hair askew and breathing hard, his prize took a moment to recover. Her warm eyes were unfocused, struggling with accusation, and Draco felt proud to look at her and know she was his.

She sensed his smugness and a flash of anger stole through her, which she had to ignore. Once there would have been hatred in her eyes, disgust too, but now there was only complacency. A hint of desire, too, unless he'd imagined it. Any hatred she surely felt was locked deep inside, and all for the better, he thought.

"Very good, kitten," he said, a curve to his lips.

She straightened and met his gaze.

"I'm glad to have pleased you, my Lord," she said woodenly, her ripened lips catching his fancy so much that he wanted to kiss her again just to bite them and make them redder, make her bleed. She knew his thought, and her eyes looked to the floor, a hint of fear and resentment in the tight line of her jaw.

Draco reached for her again and this time she stepped forth. He stood there holding her for a moment without speaking, her head nestled against his chest. His hand found her neck and his finger stroked her pulse point softly, and Hermione realized he was telling her to relax. Slowly, she allowed her limbs to thaw from their tense state. His cock was rigid in his pants—she felt it pressing against her and wondered if he would alleviate his desire then and there. Dread crawled over her skin.

"What would I be without my darling bird?" he asked softly. "How would I live had I never met you or even took you for my own?"

"You would still be a monster," she said, and his hand tightened around her neck but she knew he was not really angered by her comment.

He smiled. "McLaggen only wanted your body. With Potter, you would have led a normal, boring, unfulfilling life. Marriage, children, retirement, death. What could he give you that I can't give you tenfold?"

Hermione went still. "Don't say his name."

"You deserve more than what he could ever give you," Draco hissed. '*I married you. I gave you a child. Everything that is mine is yours. We could hold the world in our hands if we wanted to. No one else could have given you that. Not even Potter, the Chosen One.*' He spat out the last two words, as if they were vile. "He was *ordained*. He was advanced, wasn't he? He survived through so much for so long, but what did he do with his power? His connections? Nothing. He was happy to sit back and let things happen. He could have made himself stronger. He could have made himself into something great. But he was too stupid and lazy to realize that, and he was too weak to protect you—I made sure he knew that before I cut him down."

"I never asked for any of what you've given me, you know that." She closed her eyes so she wouldn't see his expression turn to anger as she spoke. "Did it ever occur to you that

normalcy was what I wanted?"

He kissed her deeply, and reluctantly, she opened her eyes.

He's trying to provoke me. It's working. She could feel the threads of her temper fraying again.

"Liar." His hands gripped her arms tightly. "You're too ambitious to have settled for him."

Her eyes flared with rage. "I *loved* him."

Swiftly, he backed her into a wall and pressed her to it hard enough to make her gasp, her back smarting with pain. She struggled and he gave her throat a warning squeeze.

Her breathing was quick, her eyes staring into his insolently, as if daring him to hit her.

"Who do you belong to?" he asked, his voice low and sharp.

She took in a juddering breath. "You."

He reached down and cupped her vulva roughly with his hand through her thin gown.

"Who fucks you every night until you're sore or screaming?"

A furious blush overtook her face. "You."

"Who gave you everything you have now?"

Her lip curled. "You."

"Now tell me again who it is you love."

"I love you, my Lord," she said robotically, after allowing herself a tiny pause, that one second of precious rebellion. "Only you."

Draco's face was so close to hers they shared breaths. She could see every marking and ripple in his pale irises. Her heart pounded viciously.

"I don't care that it's a lie," he said, after a moment, "so long as you never forget it."

She nodded, shaking in anger.

"You would have grown bored with Potter," he said, watching hate flare in her eyes before it was gutted by that empty complacency again, so as not to stoke his ire further. "He had no aspirations. He would have settled into anonymity after killing Voldemort. It was him that wanted a normal life, not you. You and I were made for a greatness he'll never know."

He reached forward to wipe at her tears gently. "You deserve an equal. Monster I may be, but I got what I wanted, and he's dead."

Hermione met his icy stare. "Even if my life was to be decided in that way, you and I know well that you didn't play fair."

He chuckled—Hermione shivered. "I couldn't risk losing to someone unworthy of you."

"And you think you're worthy."

Draco tipped her chin up to meet her eyes.

“I’ve proved I am.”

He took a step away, and finally free from being pressed against the wall, Hermione followed suit, knowing it could only incur a more thorough punishment if she left the room, even if it was all she wanted to do.

“Potter couldn’t hope to control you as I do,” he said. “If he was such as you require then you would be with him now and you’d never have landed in my bed and become my wife in the same night. McLaggen wasn’t worth your spit, let alone mine, but I killed him because he was insistent, and dared try to claim what I had already claimed and marked, for that matter.”

“Harry *never* would have wanted to control me,” she said through grit teeth. “He never would have locked and chained me up like this, like I’m some sort of helpless animal.”

Or feral, a voice whispered inside her.

Hermione shut her eyes tight as he pressed his thumb into the scars on the crook of her voice had gone rougher than gravel. Every word shook her heart. Her lungs felt weaker the tighter he held her.

“I’ve killed for you. You’ve already killed me. Despite my cages you’ve managed to break free more than once. I’ve not been the perfect husband nor you the perfect wife but we complement each other in our hates and our lusts. You ensnared me, little bird, and I thought it only fair to make sure you could never take it back. You are the only witch who could ever be worthy of me and so you are my bride.”

Hermione had heard some of this before. The other parts made her skin crawl. Draco felt this and drew closer to her.

Before she was able to control herself, her arms made to tear out of his grip. Draco reprimanded her swiftly—he whirled her around. Her back collided against his front. He’d used such force, Hermione gasped and stumbled. His hand came up to cup her jaw and forced her to tilt her head back and lean against his chest with her neck exposed to the cold air.

“Fear me,” he whispered into her ear, his lips brushing against the soft thicket of curls at the nape of her neck. She was already shaking; both in fear and anger. Sweat welled up at her temples. He licked her cold cheek where the flush from their earlier kiss had fled. She barely repressed her flinch. “Hate me, so be it. Love me. Give me your will. I am yours and you are mine.”

“I—” she swallowed; he felt it in his palm, paired with her pounding heart. He gripped her tighter.

She began to squirm against him, her ass unintentionally pushing against his groin, and his mouth curved into a smile.

“Don’t fly from me, little bird. The more you beat your wings against me the tighter I hold you, haven’t you learned by now? Your heart acknowledges your fear—never ignore it. Think ill thoughts of me, curse me as I make love to you, look at me through cold eyes and wish me dead, but never hide that fear from me. It is mine, and you have no right to keep it from me.”

Hermione struggled harder. This was a sick game, one she was being forced to play.

“Let me go.”

He never asked if I wanted to.

"It will take you time, sweetheart, I know it. I treasure anything you give me, even if I have to steal it from you. Be cold, be warm, I want everything that is you. I will be your servant just as you are mine. For you only," his hand left her rapid pulse, reached her mouth and traced the hollow of her throat. "I'm weak only for you. Therein lies your power."

Hermione closed her eyes.

His hand stroked her neck. He seemed content to stand there as they were; her neck still exposed and caught in his hand, bodies pressed close, his face buried into the curve of her neck where it met her shoulder. Hermione, not knowing what to do, took his hand away from her throat, and kissed it. That pleased him immensely, and he let her go at last.

He adjusted his robes, smoothing them where they had become wrinkled during their interaction. Hermione rubbed at the back of her neck, where she could feel the ghost of his breath still hovering there.

"I want you to become more involved in my court."

Now *that* was a first. Hermione frowned.

"Why?"

"You're my wife, that's why. I want you by my side."

Lording over that group of vile, insidious people with Draco... she fought the urge to shudder.

"You said you didn't want to be kept in the dark anymore," he reminded her. "Take my hand, and I'll show you."

He extended his arm toward her. Hermione stared at him shrewdly, but his face was blank.

After another moment, she sighed.

She took his hand.

"Show me."

He grasped her hand tightly, gave her a level look. His other hand came up and tapped her on the hollow of her collarbone. A heavy, black hooded cloak materialized onto Hermione, a thick clasp securing itself over the spot he had just touched.

"We're going to apparate."

Immediately her insides began to twist.

"Where are we going?"

His expression was unreadable. "You'll see. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

He gripped her tight with his other arm, and turned on the spot.

They landed hard, but Draco supported her as she staggered.

It was humid and drizzling, wherever they were, but none of the rain touched them. An invisible shield surrounded them and she watched, intrigued, as the droplets of rain hit and slid off the bubble he had cast around them.

“Where are we?”

Draco’s hands slid down to her waist, holding her gently. “You know.”

She frowned at that, and stared intently at the green, mountainous landscape. It was beautiful.

And too familiar...

Her hands had gone cold, even though it was warm and dry inside their bubble shield.

That tree-line, those distant hills...

Her eyes travelled south, to the lake just beyond, almost hidden by thick forestry.

Tears welled in her eyes, so thick she could hardly see. She blinked hard and swallowed.

Draco’s hand stroked her.

She turned, seeking the castle which she’d considered a second home.

At the sight of it, she let loose a strangled sob, and slid out of Draco’s hold, falling to her knees.

“No...”

She felt him crouch beside her, placing his hand on her back. He rubbed it soothingly, his other hand warm on her shoulder. She shook with emotion, hiding her face in her hands, leaning forward while Draco held onto her.

They were a good distance away, and the site of their focus appeared on a smaller scale, but even from that distance, Hermione could see everything.

Hogwarts lay in ruins. The roofs were completely gone, so many walls crumbled, others with huge, gaping walls blasted into them, the top floors all sunken and bashed in by some extreme force. Windows had been blown out; even the courtyard had not been spared. The Quidditch field was gone entirely—she wouldn’t have been surprised if it had been burned to the ground. Since the last battle that had taken place there, it had never been rebuilt, and lay in neglect, in piles of rubble. The Gryffindor towers had fallen, their bases the only parts that remained, looking very much like melted candles that were down to their last days. There, she, Harry, and Ron had become close friends, there, they had celebrated the winning of House Cups, Quidditch wins... there, they had slept in the Common Rooms, too tired to trudge up the stairs to their dormitories, they had argued over assignments and snuck food, and talked to Dobby and discussed their problems.

It all felt like it had been decades ago, even centuries, though it had been less than ten years. Looking down at it now, remembering everything that had taken place there, made her feel older than she was.

And it was gone.

The Great Hall, the classrooms, the *library*...

Of everything that had changed since she had been taken, this was the *one* thing she'd expected—no, *hoped* to stay the same.

Now she realized how foolish that had been, and how naive she had been all this time.

The only thing that had not changed in all those years was Draco.

The sobs wrenched themselves from her without warning, leaving her gasping and her nose running.

It had been so long... it shouldn't have affected her so deeply. All this time she'd stuck to the naive thought that it had been fine, just fine. That castle had withstood so much... apparently the war had been the final straw.

She cried for a long time. The whole time, she expected Draco to lose patience with her and drag her back up and back home. The rain kept falling and Draco stayed there crouched on the ground with her, consoling her, murmuring in her ear, but she heard none of it.

When the tears subsided she sniffled loudly, wiped at her eyes with her hands, and took a deep breath. Her legs were falling asleep underneath her and she was cold despite the cloak. She shook her head.

"I've dreamed of coming back here," she said, her voice raspy and drained. "I wanted it so badly... but not like this."

Not as someone's property. As a free woman, to finish my education. To say hello to people I haven't seen in years. To live my life again.

Draco sighed. "I'm sorry."

"*You did this.*" She turned to face him and pushed him roughly. "I knew it. Was killing Harry not enough? Get away from me."

She tried to push him further away when Draco came closer, grabbing her wrists.

"Let me *go!*"

"You're allowed to grieve, Hermione," he said calmly, "but I had nothing to do with this. This was all Voldemort's doing."

She paused, staring at him in confusion.

"How," she demanded, her voice flat.

"He didn't know Potter wasn't in the castle. It had been evacuated by the Order, but he didn't know. He was tired of Potter hiding. He had the giants tear it down, and when they found nothing, he did the rest."

She looked at the ruins, her heartbreak written clearly on her face. Draco felt his heart stir.

"I'm going to rebuild it," he said, and she stared at him, her eyes incredulous, suspicion hiding beneath.

“For what?” She asked bitterly, a moment after. “So you and your followers can take over it?”

“I don’t know yet,” he said, and she scoffed.

“I want to go to it,” she demanded. “Take me down there.”

They apparated directly into the ruins. Draco tucked Hermione’s hand into his bent arm and began to walk her around the dust and rubble. Huge slabs of stone and columns, large pieces of wood scattered the floor. Splintered furniture littered the ground everywhere. Glass crunched under their feet.

Hermione pressed her lips together, looking around, trying to discern what had once been amongst the remains.

“I know how much it meant to you,” he said, squeezing her hand. “I’m sorry.”

Hermione didn’t reply to that. It had been years, and the ruins had probably been picked clean since, but fear of finding a corpse crushed under the debris gripped her. She tried to push it away, and tried to imagine what it had been like in the castle’s final moments before being torn down like it was made of sand.

“After Potter killed Voldemort, and his followers were put in Azkaban, I knew I was powerful enough to kill him, but I bided my time,” Draco began. “By then I had decided I wanted a child from you, and wanted to make sure my plans were foolproof. I broke Azkaban open, and took my former master’s followers, and recruited more. I wanted Potter and his Order to believe that you and I had faded away somewhere, that we were completely out of reach, to get them off our trail for a while. I let them into our old Manor, to distract them while we went farther away. Let that guilt tear them apart while I prepared for battle.’ He stroked her hair. “They tried so hard to find you, little bird, but they didn’t come in time.”

“I infiltrated the school,” he continued, his pale eyes sweeping slowly across the landscape. “It was during a holiday break, so there weren’t many people there. I knew the second I stepped into these grounds they would come with their wands drawn, and they did. I knew they wouldn’t be prepared. They hadn’t expected me to choose this place for another battle, only a year after the last one. Potter challenged me. He said he’d get you back at any cost.’ Draco let out a laugh. “He attacked and then evaded me, the coward. He’s good at dueling, but in the end, you saw what happened. You got there just in time.”

Hermione tilted her head up to the sky, silently willing her tears not to fall.

“The moment they saw him go down, a good number of the fighters on their side ran off. We captured a few of them for information and killed the rest. I spared Longbottom only because of your interference. The Weasley girl and most of her brothers died, including the one you were closest to. I saw the half-giant Hagrid die at the hands of five Death Eaters. His brute dog went next. Everything was a blur.”

“What happened to Neville after?” She asked, afraid of the answer.

“My spies tracked him as he fled to America with Lovegood,” he said dismissively. “Last I heard, they went to South America, but I have reason to believe he came back to England five months ago.”

At this Hermione stiffened.

“He’s still looking for you,” Draco said, turning to give Hermione an empty, mocking smile. “What devotion.”

Hermione shook her head, wanting his words to stop.

“He’s the reason we’ve been moving so frequently,” Draco said. “I know you’d wondered why. They found a way to track me for a brief period—clever, but I found a way around it. We won’t be moving again for some time.”

He sounded so sure. Hermione wanted to tear out his throat.

There was one of the House hourglasses. Its large oak frame was on the floor, huge jagged glass shards lying around them. Draco steered her around it. She couldn’t tell which house it had belonged to. All the gems that had once been inside it were long gone, taken by scavengers, likely.

“He and Lovegood have been building up a new resistance. A small one, but they’re gathering resources, too. I haven’t been able to find their hideout, but my spies have been working on that for some time. They keep coming here to look for something. I don’t know what they want, but I put new wards around here so I can get to it, first.”

Hermione took in a deep breath.

“What do you think it is?”

Draco shook his head. “Probably some relic Potter left behind. They probably think it can help them defeat me.”

Hermione frowned. “What sort of relic?”

“I’m not sure. His wand, perhaps, or something else of personal value to him.” He stepped around a large slab of stone. “Curiously, his wand did go missing right after I killed him. I was too distracted with you breaking into the battlefield to notice until it was too late.”

“What would they even do with a relic?” Hermione asked.

Draco shook his head again, a snort of contempt coming from him. “I think they want to resurrect him.”

The sound of the rain, the sound of his voice faded away. A loud buzzing filled her ears, and she stopped in her tracks, her face going white.

Is it possible? How?

“Don’t worry, little bird,” he said, crossing his arms in front of his chest, fixing her with a hard stare. “It’s *extremely* unlikely that they’ll be able to manage it. Not without his blood, anyhow, and I know for certain they’ll never get hold of it.”

“How...”

“How do I know?” Draco grinned. “I kept his corpse. Burned it myself, but before that, I took his blood. Every last drop of it. I had his body strung up in our dungeon for days, to

make sure I got it all. I debated letting you come down to say goodbye, but I didn't think you would want to. Not like that."

"*You don't get to make decisions for me!*" She hissed, so sharp her teeth clicked together painfully. "Not anymore!"

"Of course," he said, his eyes gleaming. "But I reserve judgement for when I know what will make for a better outcome."

"Oh, god—" Hermione beat her elbow against the bubble. "Let me out, I'm going to be sick."

He motioned with his hand and at once the bubble was gone and the rain pelted them in full, falling cold and fast. Neither cared.

Hermione leaned over a pile of debris and retched, clutching her stomach. Tears blurred her vision.

"I destroyed most of it, the blood," he continued obliviously from behind her. His hand was on her back again, stroking to comfort, but she felt anything but comforted, shivering violently under his hand, wishing she had a dagger or that she could pick up one of the many heavy stones that lay around to smash his head in with.

"I kept just enough, though. A sort of trophy, if you will."

When she had finished, she wiped her mouth and let herself sink slowly down to the floor, wiping at her mouth and eyes. Draco spelled away the sick, and muttered another spell to clean her face. She sat limp against a pile of large rocks, not caring that it was uncomfortable. Draco came forward and knelt in front of her.

"You wanted to know," he reminded her gently. Hermione refused to look at him, but she nodded.

He was right. She had spent too long a time in the dark over the fates of her friends, of the world at hand. She supposed she had wanted to shield herself from more sorrow, but she had known there would be casualties. She regretted ever having asked.

Forgive me, Harry.

Ron was gone. Ginny was gone. Who else? She couldn't bear to ask. She would find out in time. This was already too much grief for one day. She could feel it tearing her in two, right down the middle.

He had killed her friends and family. He might not have been directly responsible for the destruction of Hogwarts, but he could have done *something* to prevent it.

And this whole time, she had done nothing else but warm his bed. Unwilling it may have been, but what else had she done?

All this time, I should have been doing something more.

Self-hatred bloomed inside her, crawling up her spine, even as another voice spoke up within her.

*You did what you could. Don't torture yourself. He's had you so restrained, what else **could** you have done? You found ways to escape. You saw Harry and the Weasleys one last time and gave them all the information you could. You saved Neville's life. If you hadn't, there wouldn't be a growing rebellion now. There's still hope, small though it might be. There was only so much you could do, considering what you were facing within these walls.*

A minute passed, and then another, as she felt her strength return. Draco waited patiently. He reached out and brushed the wetness from her cheek with a finger. She was shivering, pale, wet. Drops of rain dripped from her nose and trickled down her lips. Inside, her heart ached fiercely. Hermione finally met his eyes.

Detached concern was etched across his face. His hair was wet through with the rain, and plastered to his head, but he looked beautiful as ever. He blinked the rain from his eyes. He wiped the tears from the other side of her face.

"Is that enough for today?" He asked quietly.

Hermione tilted her head back and took a deep breath.

"No," she said. It took effort to speak. "I want to know everything."

Draco had never shown himself to be a political man, like his father, but as he went on, he revealed he had ties to everywhere and everyone. They had been gained through either bribery, a genuine personal connection, or blackmail. Hermione found herself surprised to hear none of this.

"When I need a favor, they're always more than willing to oblige," he said matter of factly as they continued to walk, Hermione pale and withdrawn, he, looking and feeling as though he was taking a normal promenade with his wife. "I don't involve myself too heavily in their doings unless it's something that affects us."

"Like what?" Her voice was dead. All emotion had left her, for the time being. She felt empty. Hollow.

But my body feels as heavy as if it were filled with cement.

Like the rain and his words had flushed the energy from her body.

Draco thought for a moment. "There was an inquiry at the Ministry some years back, to look into falsified and incorrect documents, and have them investigated. There's nothing wrong with our marriage certificate, but seeing as it doesn't bear your signature, I had that fixed and tucked away from prying eyes. The Minister himself won't be able to touch it, if under threat of death or impeachment."

"You're very thorough."

"I have to be."

He raised the bubble back around them, and instantly they were dry and warm again. He took Hermione's arm carefully and helped her up.

"Let's go home," he said, stroking her cheek.

When they Apparated into their bedroom, the bubble burst with a quiet *pop*, and Draco undid the clasp on her cloak, sliding it off her shoulders. Hermione stood there, unresponsive and numb.

“Frankly speaking,” he said softly, ‘I am more powerful than the Minister. He is independent, but if I strolled into his office tomorrow morning and told him to execute half the magical community, he’d do it without asking questions.’ He gave her a pointed sidelong glance. “Keep that in mind if you’re ever seeking anyone to help you.”

He rubbed his hands along her arms, as if sensing her numbness. Hermione stared through him. Draco turned her around and undid the zipper of her gown, helped her out of her shoes, and when she was nude, he pulled the covers back from the bed and eased her into it. She turned on her side, hugging herself, facing away from him.

“Voldemort was weak,” he said. “He only needed one Horcrux to gain immortality. Because of his fear and greed, he made seven, and that took so much of his power. He was still powerful, but not as much as before he’d tried to kill Potter as an infant. I’m no fool. I won’t make seven.”

Goosebumps erupted over Hermione’s skin.

She felt him climb into bed behind her, as nude as she was. His arms wrapped around her. She felt his erection pressing against her. She closed her eyes briefly.

Harry, forgive me.

After everything she had heard that day, the absolute *last* thing she wanted was to fuck the man that had caused her so much pain, but if she was going to end this all, she couldn’t do it without her magic.

If I want to get free, I have to start acting as soon as possible. No matter how hard it might be.

She turned around with some difficulty, and took his length in her hand, and began to stroke.

Draco groaned softly, lying flat on his back.

Hermione brought herself closer to him, used her other hand to play with his sac.

Squeeze it until he begs for mercy. Until it bursts and bleeds.

He chuckled, pushing his hips into her hand.

“If you wanted your magic back this badly,” he said his hand traveling down between her thighs, “you should have just done all this from the beginning. It’s not so bad, is it.”

He curled his fingers inside her for emphasis. Hermione wanted to claw his eyes out.

She let him go abruptly, pushing his hand from her thighs and turned away again to the far side of the bed, drawing the covers up to cover herself.

“If you wanted affection so badly, you should have fucked your mother rather than rape me,” she retorted, the words coming from her mouth before she’d even had time to stop and censor herself.

She regretted them immediately.

This is going to set me back to square one, she thought, hear heart racing, waiting for his retaliation, for his hand to grip her throat, for his slap, anything. His hand had paused it's ministrations inside her, and he had gone still.

She waited, filled with dread.

To her shock, he laughed instead.

A/N: Please review!

6. The Last Bastions

Wanted to spoil you lot with a new update! This is longer than normal, so please expect a wait for the next update.

Six.

The next morning Hermione rose early before Draco and readied herself quickly. He was deep asleep, an arm still outstretched onto her side of the bed where it had been draped over her as she had slept, holding her closely to his body.

She threw on a simple black dress and tugged boots on underneath it. Draco liked her to wear more formal shoes when in the Manor, but more often than not she was barefoot unless they had company. Still, where she would be going today she needed something more durable. She tugged them on and laced them up, frowning at the style. When she had asked Draco for them, he had obliged, though he had insisted for something more reflective of her status as a Lady. She'd held her ground, but even though she'd gotten her those plain, sturdy boots, he had added a small heel to them that defeated the purpose.

She braided her hair quickly and when done, approached the bed. She pushed Draco's legs out of the way so she could sit down. This roused him and he sat up, wincing at the bright light coming in from the uncovered windows. He pushed his hair from his face, sighing.

When he had gathered his wits his eyes cleared and he looked her up and down, noting her attire. His lips curved upwards with amusement and he met her eye, raising a brow.

"And where are you going?" He purred.

He'd spent so much time trying to teach her how to act like a lady, while she had been pregnant with Lucio.

'You shouldn't have to say 'please'. You shouldn't be afraid to take what you want, or demand it from others. They are loyal, and will gladly give you anything you ask.'

*'Threats **do** help now and then.'*

'Speak firmly. Look them all in the eye and don't waver. Let them know you fear no one. No one but me.'

So many others... she hadn't always paid attention, but whenever she was in the presence of his court, she obeyed, not wanting them to see her weakness, even though it was blatantly displayed any time Draco had her at his side. She held no power.

'But you are my Lady and my wife, and they love and fear you as much as they do me.'

Was he angry over her comment from the night before? He had done nothing but laugh, and it was unsettling, to say the least. She fought the urge to bite her lip, wondering if he was simply biding his time to punish her. In the past, he likely would have Cruicio'd her again, as he had done once, or beaten her black and blue. It made her almost physically ill to remember that, to remember that odd gap in her memory after the Cruciatus incident, and wanting so

badly to ask what had happened, but ultimately realizing it was probably too horrific, and she was better off not knowing.

He had deeply loved his mother—when she had passed and it had affected him so badly, it had struck her then to remember how human he was still, despite the things he did to her.

But now...

That laugh. So callous, yet genuine. He had fallen asleep shortly after, like it hadn't meant a thing to him but amuse him.

Well, whatever might come, it was never good, and she wasn't going to poke the fire with kindle, so to speak. She would pretend it never happened, and hoped he would, too.

Hermione squared her shoulders and kept her face still like stone, so that he would know she would not accept a refusal.

"You're going to show me where my friends are buried. I want to pay my respects."

At this he nodded, as if he had expected it.

"Pansy will take you," he said. "I have business to attend to, unless you'd rather I go with you."

An emphatic 'no' almost slipped from her lips, but she caught it in time.

"That would be a bad idea," was all she said, but her voice was clipped.

He had expected her declining of his offer, but was surprised by her keeping herself in check, after her outburst from the night before. That had pricked at him, at first, but he had laughed, genuinely delighted to feel and hear that rage simmering inside her.

It seemed uncontrollable at times, for her. He found that extremely interesting. Certain questions he'd had brewing in the back of his mind for some years resurfaced. His eyes fixed on her ring.

Could it be?

She had always had fangs. That was one of the reasons he had fallen for her. Lately, they were growing sharper.

It was incredible, watching her transformation. All thanks to that rage.

Let it burn you, my love. Let it love you. Forge it into a weapon. Wield it like a sword.

She was still standing, wavering slightly though she tried to stand as still as possible, growing more nervous as she awaited his response.

Perhaps, with some fine-tuning, I can use that to my advantage, he thought. I'll make a proper Queen of you, wife.

"As you wish, my Lady," he said at last.

She seemed a little uneasy at having such little opposition, but having got what she wanted, was not fool enough to linger in case he changed his mind.

"Thank you, my Lord."

He got up and wrapped his arm around her, pressing her against him. His lips pressed against hers gently, their foreheads touching. She closed her eyes.

“Be quick,” he said, as he pulled away. “Martin will be waiting for you at the usual time.”

“I’ll take as long as I damn please,” Hermione said.

Again, contrary to her expectation, he smiled.

“Make sure you’re home before dinner, then.”

Pansy was waiting outside the bedroom, already dressed in her gilded black robes.

A mark of servitude and loyalty to him. Pansy rarely wore anything else. Perhaps that was a requirement in her contract with Draco. It was only when Draco was away from the Manor that she donned lighter colors.

“Good morning, my Lady,” Pansy said, bowing, knowing Draco could hear them from inside the bedroom.

“Good morning, Pansy,” Hermione said. “How is Lucio?”

“Still asleep. Shall I wake him, my Lady?”

“No,” Hermione said. “Let him rest. I’ll see him later.”

They went down to the foyer. Draco was able to Apparate from anywhere inside the house, but for Pansy, she was only allowed to Apparate from the one designated room.

“You know where they’re buried?” Hermione asked.

Pansy fastened her own cloak around her neck. “Yes. Draco sent me the information just now.” In her hand, a little note lay slightly crumpled. She closed her fist, and it vanished. She looked at Hermione.

“Are you ready, my Lady?” She offered her arm for Hermione to take.

Hermione stepped in closer, legs slightly unsteady. “Yes.”

They landed just outside the Burrow.

Remarkably, it was mostly intact, although Hermione suspected it had been uninhabited for many years now. The lawn was overrun and waist-high. Some of the windows were open, and just thinking about how long they had been that way, letting in the elements over time to destroy and wear at everything inside made her heart sink. There was a desolate look to the place that made her shudder to remember all the happy times she had spent there once.

This was a home, once. Another life ago.

It was so quiet. She half expected to hear Ron shouting from somewhere within the house the longer she looked at it, or hear the twins’ laughter, or smell some of Mrs. Weasley’s delicious cooking.

But the house was still and silent.

Her body shook.

Pansy touched her shoulder.

"Should I raise a shield, if you're too cold?" Pansy asked.

"I'm not cold," Hermione said quietly. "Just... nervous."

Pansy's hand squeezed hers.

"Their bodies were burned after the battle by Draco and his followers," Pansy said softly. "Those on Potter's side who survived remembered those who'd been killed, and made graves for them, even if they didn't have their bodies."

"Who else was killed?" Hermione asked.

"I'm not sure," Pansy said. "I wasn't there, I was abroad. Draco offered me to work for him so I came back well after it was over, just as you two had moved here with baby Lucio. I'm still finding out who died, years later. There were so many..."

Hermione felt oddly comforted by that. So she wasn't the only one who was so out of the loop.

"They're in the garden," Pansy said, nodding in that direction. "People rarely come here, so we're not likely to be disturbed by anyone. Regardless, you've been disguised already."

Hermione nodded absently and touched her face, feeling the changed facial features that Draco's wards had given her for the trip.

Very thorough.

"Do you want to be alone?" Pansy asked.

"Yes, please."

Pansy squeezed her hand. "I'll keep lookout from here. Call for me if you need anything, or once you're ready to leave."

The garden had run wild and rampant with neglect. Flowers had died and shrubs had grown shaggy; weeds had sprouted everywhere. Hermione closed the door of the tall wooden fence behind her and stepped in, her breath a suspended cloud in her throat.

It was like a forest had exploded in their contained garden over time. Trees stood where there never had been any before. A soft wind rustled through, but as she listened close, not a single bird or creature appeared to inhabit the space.

It's only been a few years. Those kinds of trees don't grow to maturity that quickly. Who did this?

She looked around suspiciously.

Where are the graves?

She walked around slowly, cautiously picking her way through. There had been a shed to the far left once, but it was either obscured by the trees or it had been torn down.

Something isn't right.

She got the strangest feeling, the farther she got. Like the forest expanded the deeper she went in. Like the Weasley's garden had been enchanted to conceal something.

But why can I see it?

She looked back, and couldn't find the wall of the wooden fence anymore. Pansy was waiting just outside it for her call.

Does she know? Can she sense it? Can she see it? Can she even see me?

Her pulse was picking up speed.

Not knowing why, she reached up to touch her face, and froze.

Draco's disguising spell had gone away. The rounder cheeks and Romanesque nose were gone, her own familiar features returned.

What's happening?

Instinct prodded her to turn back and leave at once. But she wasn't afraid—not entirely.

She pressed forward, heart in throat, sorely missing her wand. Even if she couldn't use magic, it would have been comforting just to hold it at her side.

It was so quiet. Peaceful. She found herself wondering if Draco had set this up before her arrival as some sort of cruel trick.

I wouldn't put it past him.

It might have been an hour later. It could have happened in seconds.

She took a turn somewhere and a clearing opened up into view, where previously there had been nothing, no path to indicate anything. Hermione could see headstones. She hesitated, drawing her cloak around herself for warmth, took a breath, and advanced.

The headstones were smallish, made out of plain stone. She supposed in the mess after the battle, no one had wanted to stick around long enough for fear of being found by Draco's rabid followers.

They didn't say much—just names and years. Some only had names.

Padma Patil. Parvati Patil. Lavender Brown. Michael Corner. Justin Finch-Fletchley.

Tears welled in her eyes. She hugged herself and moved on.

Minerva McGonagall.

Rubeus Hagrid.

Cho Chang.

Ginny Weasley.

George Weasley.

Molly Weasley.

Arthur Weasley.

Bill Weasley.

Fleur Weasley.

Remus Lupin.

And the last one...

Harry Potter.

Hermione, unable to stifle the tears any longer, let them fall freely. They rolled down her cheeks, while she huddled close to Harry's headstone and sat against it, holding herself so tightly for fear of falling apart at last within this strange, enchanted place.

Her hand pressed against the smooth, cool stone and she pressed her cheek against it, weeping quietly as if it might let her remember what his kiss had felt like, for time and Draco's insistent ardor had edged that from her memory.

She kissed the stone. "I'm so sorry it took me all this time to find you."

Her body shuddered with her sobs, wrenching itself in grief.

They had all died trying to take Draco down. They had tried so hard to find and rescue her. She had never been able to say thank you, or even goodbye, and now they were long gone.

Her family... gone. Nothing but empty graves and ashes, somewhere. Names to be uttered on Draco's cruel tongue as markers of conquest, as tools to inflict pain, like a most ancient curse.

They had looked for her when she had been missing. When she had escaped, they had helped her heal. They had loved her and she them. And there was the hand that had been dealt to them in return.

"I'm sorry," she repeated. "I'm so sorry..."

Her cry was short—she supposed she had exhausted her supply of tears the day before, and she was glad. She had cried enough. She simply lay there against Harry's headstone, utterly spent and thinking of what life might have been like if things had gone a different route. If none of those headstones existed—at least, not yet. If she had been smart enough to not get herself kidnapped.

She went to each grave individually, smoothing her hand along their tops, offering her grief as a sort of recompense for what she had not been able to do for them. That, and a promise.

He won't get a grave.

She lingered again at Harry's.

"I still love you," she said softly. The breeze ruffled her hair. "I always will."

She straightened and sucked in a breath. Her throat was sticky and sore from all the crying over the past two days.

"I'll be back," she said, pulling her hood over her head, and turned to leave.

The moment she had turned her back, she felt a shift in the air around her. It was too late as she turned to see what it was. Something knocked her to the ground, and her hood fell further over her face, obscuring her head entirely. She shook her head like an animal, twisting, trying to get it off, barely managing to uncover one eye. Her legs and hands were bound together. A gag forced its way into her mouth and she lay on her side, breathing rapidly, heart racing, eyes wide and scanning the area for the intruder.

There—to the far right—

A cloaked figure approached, wand drawn.

Draco. She'd been right.

Why bother going to all these lengths?

Perhaps he'd truly been angered by her insult from the night before, and had plotted for revenge.

The figure strode toward her with intent.

Panicking, Hermione tried to wriggle away, fighting against her restraints.

The figure stopped in front of her and crouched, grasping the hood of her cloak and pulling it off entirely.

Hermione winced, and stared up at the concealed face of her captor, expecting Draco's cold laugh to come next.

"I thought it might be you... I didn't actually expect it to..." came a familiar female voice, slightly breathless, and full of relief.

Hermione frowned.

The figure reached up slowly to pull off their hood. Hermione recoiled, but her hood was pulled off, and Hermione stared up in shock at Luna Lovegood.

She was much thinner than Hermione remembered; her face lovely, but a little gaunt. There were those large and bright blue eyes, that long, silvery blonde hair, almost the same color as Draco's. Her radish earrings and bottlecap necklace were long gone. She beamed at Hermione, who stared at her slack-jawed.

"Oh! I'm sorry. Here," Luna said. She pointed her wand at Hermione. "Relashio."

Hermione scuttled back at once and stood, her face pale.

"Prove it," she said. "Prove to me you're not in disguise."

I've been fooled too many times before...

Luna's smile faltered. "Well, Neville and I put spells on this place to cancel out and glamour or disguise spells. Too many enemies were coming in here to poke around or vandalize. I'm sure you had one on before coming in here, didn't you?"

Hermione wasn't convinced, although Luna's mention of Neville had her weak in the knees with relief.

“Prove it.”

Luna thought for a moment. “Remember that silly lion’s head hat I made in Hogwarts?” She smiled sadly at the memory. “It took me about a week to make. Professor Flitwick helped me charm it to get it to roar. Everybody liked it, which was nice, since they usually didn’t like the things I made. It’s gone now, but I think one day I’ll make another just like it.”

Hermione had her hands over her mouth. Though neither she or Luna had ever been close, she was still touched to see Luna’s eyes were as tearful as her own.

Luna approached her, her arms held out as if coming in for a hug.

“We knew you’d come here eventually. We’ve been waiting for so long.”

“No!” Hermione said quickly, backing away from her reach. Luna halted, worried.

“What’s the matter?” She asked. “Are you alright? Has he hurt you again? Neville’s taken care of Parkinson—has she hurt you, too?”

“No,” Hermione blurted. “Pansy’s my friend. She works for Draco but she’s kind to me, please don’t hurt her!”

Luna’s eyes went wide. “*Oh.*” She closed her eyes and raised her wand. A silvery hare materialized, and sped off behind them, relaying an unspoken message.

“I want to hug you so much,” Hermione said, wiping at her eyes. “It’s so good to see you.”

“Why can’t you?” Luna asked.

Hermione held out her hand to show Luna her ring.

“Draco put spells on it to control me. He knows whenever a man touches me. I’m not sure if it does the same for a woman. I think he only meant it for if someone tried to make an advance toward me—he’s incredibly possessive—I don’t want to risk it.”

Luna stared gravely at the ring.

Hermione couldn’t help but sense that the war had taken something from Luna, just as Draco had taken from Hermione. Luna seemed more grounded and less dreamy than she had ever remembered her being. Her heart constricted.

“Well you’re safe now,” Luna said. “Neville’s coming with Parkinson. If you like, we can bring her, too.”

“Where?” Hermione asked. “What’s happening? Where *are* we?”

Footsteps came up behind them. Hermione whirled around.

Neville wasn’t smiling. There was an urgent look in his eyes as he beheld her, striding forward quickly. Pansy’s body floated behind him—Hermione’s breath caught, but Pansy was merely unconscious.

“Don’t touch her,” Luna warned Neville as he almost ran forward to Hermione, who was so shaken she stepped back again. “*He’ll know.*”

“I know,” Neville said, glancing down angrily at Hermione’s ring. “I remember.”

He looked back up at Hermione. Relief slumped his shoulders. "I told you we'd come back for you."

Hermione smiled, nodding, tears sliding from her eyes again.

"I've missed you so much. I'm so glad you're okay."

"I'm glad you're okay, too. Don't worry, it's safe here. He can't see this place. Just the garden." He scanned her form. "I was so worried, after you went back to him... Are you hurt at all?"

"No."

"And he's not here?"

"No, thank goodness. What is this place?" She asked again.

They were quiet for a moment.

"We couldn't find any bodies," Luna said softly. "We think he burned them all. But we saw them die. We couldn't just let it be." She shook her head. "There's probably many we missed, but we can't know for sure."

Hermione stared down at the graves, her stomach rolling uneasily. If Draco hadn't burned all the bodies, how many more graves would there be here now?

"We came back here to rest for a bit," Neville said. "You'd saved my life but I knew Malfoy would kill me in a heartbeat if he saw me again that night. We couldn't stay here for too long."

"Just long enough to get food and take off," Luna said, nodding. "He wanted to go back for you, to try one last time."

Hermione looked at Neville, who was shaking his head.

"It was a bad idea, I know," he said. "In the end, I couldn't. We were too weak. Luna had to drag me away from the Burrow. But I couldn't forget the look in your eyes when you told me to run. I thought it was the last time I'd ever see you alive."

"I'm glad you didn't," Hermione said. "I've endured. If you had gone back there, he probably would have killed us both."

Neville nodded. "We went to the United States for a few years. We were bitter, and weak, and didn't know what to do. After that battle, after Harry died, everyone kind of just... vanished." He scowled. "Which made it easier for Malfoy to take over."

"We wanted to come back to England sooner, but couldn't," he added, looking haunted. "He's had his people following us everywhere we go. We've had to be more and more careful, but I couldn't get it out of my head. You sacrificed yourself to save me. To that monster. I had to go back. But we heard he'd moved and hidden you somewhere new, and we didn't know the first place to start looking. He's been using such advanced magic. He's even created some spells of his own, and those are a *bitch* to get through, but we've learned from them, and we've made a few of our own."

"How?"

“We’ve slowly been learning how to make our own spells,” Neville explained as Luna and Hermione broke their embrace. “I remembered what you told me about some of the spells he put on that ring. We’ve done loads of research but couldn’t find much that would help us—I don’t know how he got hold of those spells. They’re either banned now (and with good reason) or he made them himself. I wanted to create a ward or shield or *something* to nullify some of those, so that if we could find you again, he wouldn’t be able to track you. It isn’t permanent, but it’s a start.”

Hermione looked skeptically down at the ring. “So if you or Luna touch me, he won’t be able to sense it.”

“We’ve tested it. We don’t have your ring, of course, but we’ve made substitutes. Not as powerful but our spells seem to have worked every time.” His face turned grave again. “I’ve studied this thoroughly.”

“If I let you touch me, and he senses it, can you get away?”

“We can,” Neville said intently. “Before he gets here.”

Hermione braced herself. “Be ready.”

And, without restraint, she flung herself at Neville, waiting for the ring to blast withering pain through her. He grabbed her, almost lifting her off the ground.

Nothing came.

“I don’t believe it,” she breathed, cupping Neville’s cheek in her palm. His missing ear was hidden by his hair—part of the lobe was still attached to his head. Draco had intentionally done a sloppy job.

Still, no pain. The ring seemed to have gone dormant.

Shocked, she let out an incredulous laugh, and hugged him harder. Neville held her so tight she could hardly breathe.

His tears smeared onto her cheek.

“Thank Merlin we found you,” he said, his voice wavering with emotion. “I promised Harry I’d help you get out for good.”

He let her go and Luna swooped in next, wrapping her arms tight around Hermione, who buried her head into her shoulder.

“You’re safe now,” Luna whispered to her, and Hermione nodded tearfully.

“You never have to go back to that piece of shit,” Neille said, his voice hoarse. “Ever.”

“You said he can’t see this place?”

“We tailored this one so that when he comes to the Burrow, he’ll see the fence, and the garden, and he’ll see the graves, but this forest won’t be there. It won’t be this large place for him. He never comes here though, so it was a bit of a waste. We keep this place under tight surveillance. Sometimes we use it to meet allies. There’s wards to detect visitors and whether they’re Death Eaters or not. That’s how we knew you were here.” He looked back at the

headstones sadly. “They deserve better, though. One day, we’re going to give them a better resting place.”

He trailed off. “We didn’t know if Draco told you about this place or not, or if you might come yourself to look around. We figured it was a long shot, knowing how he hardly lets you out of his sight. But we have wards around Hogwarts, too, and we sensed the both of you there yesterday. We were hopeful. We knew you would want to come here, next.”

“We were prepared to fend off Draco, if he came, too,” Luna said.

“He’s too dangerous,” Hermione warned, going pale. “I wouldn’t have wanted you to risk death for me.”

“Well, for now, looks like we avoided it,” Neville said. ‘At least, until he realizes you’re gone.’ He motioned to her hand. “We’ll find a way to get that ring off you once we’re home. Come with us. The others will want to see you, too.”

He extended a hand. Hermione wanted so badly to reach out for it, but didn’t.

“I can’t go with you,” she said.

Neville’s face fell. “Why not? Has he put more spells on you?”

Hermione’s face contorted with anguish. “My son. I can’t leave him behind.”

They looked stunned.

“A son?” Neville asked, his face draining of color.

Hermione frowned. “I thought everyone knew. He’s four years old. Draco named him Lucio.”

“We were out of the country for a long time,” Neville said raggedly. He ran his palm over his face.

“Five years old?” Luna asked, covering her mouth. “We had no idea. We haven’t heard about him anywhere—” Sympathy stirred in her eyes. “Was—was the child forced?”

Hermione couldn’t bring herself to say it aloud. But she nodded.

Neville swore. He hugged her fiercely. “I’m so sorry, Hermione.”

“He isn’t like him,” Hermione told them. “Lucio is sweet, and caring. He’s only a boy. I’ll die before I let him turn out like his father.”

“I’m sorry I can’t go with you,” she said, her heart sinking. “I want to, more than anything. But I know he’ll use my son against me to come back. I won’t leave without him or Pansy. I don’t doubt he’ll kill either of them to get to me.”

“How can we keep in contact with you?” Neville asked hurriedly.

“I don’t know. I don’t want to risk it. He’ll know.” She pushed her hair from her face. “I’ll try to come back here. It might be some time from now.”

“Okay,” Neville said. “Is there anything else we can do?”

“Spark up activity far away, if you can,” Hermione said. ‘Far from here. He always goes to inspect that himself, and it buys me time. Right now, I’m just trying to get my magic back.’ She wouldn’t tell them exactly what that entailed. “He wants me to play along with his court. If you hear anything about me being... unlike myself, know I’m only doing it to end this.”

They nodded.

“I hate this,” Neville said.

“I know.”

“I wish I didn’t have a son, so I could stay here forever,” Hermione admitted softly, feeling guilt and self-hatred cleave at her heart. “And never go back to that house. What kind of mother would ever think that?”

“The kind who has suffered for too long,” Luna said firmly. “You shouldn’t think like that, Hermione.”

“I know,” she replied softly. “I may not have wanted him, but I love my son.”

She looked back at Pansy.

“I can’t use magic at all,” she asked. “Can you help me take her back to outside the gate?”

“Of course.”

While Luna stood Pansy up exactly where she’d been before, Neville lingered with Hermione back inside the garden.

She hugged him.

“Don’t come looking for me, no matter what happens,” Hermione said. ‘I’ll come to you, when it’s time.’ She took a deep breath. “And if I never do, whether he finally kills me or I’m still stuck there, I want you to end my life if you can, the next time you see me.”

Neville looked horrified.

“What about your son?”

She hesitated. “I can’t picture living my life normally after this,” she said, her voice breaking. “He’s ruined so much of me and for me. I can’t bear it anymore.”

“Hermione...”

“I’ll have my magic back soon,” she said confidently. No room for doubt.

“I’ll send Lucio to school, so he’ll be out of Draco’s influence.” She blinked back tears. ‘I want him to have a normal childhood, the kind Draco thinks will make him weak. But if something happens to me, and I’m unable to do that, if you could find him, and take care of him for me,’ she squeezed his hand, “it would mean the world to me.”

“Of course, I will.” His hands dug into her back. “But you’re going to live through this, Hermione. I swear it. You’ve been through enough. You deserve peace.”

“I’m ready for it all to end,” she said, her voice firm. “If I can escape and live peacefully with my son, I’ll do it. But I’m afraid Draco will have had enough, and his obsession and

wrath will get the better of him. He won't let me go—not alive, at least. The best thing I can do is try to kill him, and let my son live a normal life. My son, first. He is the top priority.”

Neville shook his head.

“Promise me, Neville,” she insisted. “Take care of my son, if I fail. Save him and take my life, if I remain trapped. I refuse to live my life out, trapped with a mad man.”

Perhaps it was a coward's path. She wasn't proud of herself. But if she was out of the picture, Draco's obsession would end.

It has to.

He had said he was going to make a Horcrux for himself. She held no doubt that he would try to make one for her as well, to keep her with him and defy death. She had to act before that happened, or her last chance would be ripped from her fingers.

If she ran away, he'd find her and keep her or kill her. She would fight to the death to make sure Lucio would be safe and free from all that, first. She was sure Draco would likely put up more of a fight to keep her than his own son. She would use that to her advantage.

I'll take any advantage I can find. Anything, for freedom. For the both of us, or for him only.

Luna's Patronus hare sprinted through the fence, and nodded at them. She was ready to wake Pansy. She had already been obliterated, and had her memory modified. There was little chance of Draco looking into her mind, as he relied so heavily on that ring, but just in case he did, they were covered.

“Goodbye, and thank you,” she said to both the hare and Neville, knowing that the hare would convey her message back to Luna. She kissed Neville on the cheek.

“I hope we see each other again.”

“We will. And I'll look after—after Lucio, if things go wrong,” he said. “I promise.”

She pressed his hand. “Thank you.”

Luna apparated beside them, and hugged Hermione.

“Be safe,” she whispered. Hermione nodded, and went to the gate's door.

“One last request,” she said, before leaving. “He'll be able to smell you both on me.”

“Shit,” Neville said in understanding. He raised his wand and cast a charm her way. Hermione felt some invisible force dust her off completely, like a jet of air from directly overhead.

“Goodbye,” she said, casting one last look at them. She was sure her eyes were red and puffy from all the crying she'd done; her nose was stuffy again and she felt her heart twist and break the moment the gate closed behind her.

Pansy went up to her immediately, one hand on her back, showing no sign of being aware of what had happened.

“I'm sorry,” she said, her voice soft. “How do you feel?”

“Exhausted,” Hermione said. “But I’m glad I came. Please take me home.”

Pansy nodded, and they apparated back to the Manor.

The first thing she did upon arriving was to visit her son. Lucio was bored, an open book lying off to the side utterly ignored as he stared out the window with his elbows propped on the sill, one hand with a finger extended drawing on the glass, the other supporting his head. He hummed to himself merrily. His door had been open, so Hermione paused at the doorway and watched, her heart softening.

About a minute later, she knocked on the door frame, and he whirled around.

“What are you playing, darling?”

“I want to fly in the clouds,” Lucio said, smiling, running up to her and throwing his arms around her. “They look so soft! Have you ever touched a cloud, mummy? Do you know what they’re like?”

“I’ve never touched one,” Hermione admitted, sitting them both down on his bed. “I know clouds look fluffy, but they’re actually rather cold, and you can’t really grab them.”

“Oh,” Lucio said, looked crestfallen. “Why?”

“They’re made of water drops or ice crystals,” Hermione informed him.

“Why?”

Hermione smiled. “I don’t know.”

Lucio was frowning, staring out the window again. “I still want to touch one. Can I fly up there, Mummy?”

“Perhaps when you’re a little older, she said, ruffling his hair. It was as pale as Draco’s, but was wavy, not quite curly like hers.

“Why not now?”

“Because it’s getting late, my love,” she said, pointing to the sun that was beginning to set. “And I don’t think your Father will approve until you’ve been flying for a few more years.”

Lucio scowled more deeply. “I’m going to be the *best* flyer when I’m older, mummy.”

“Of course you will,” she said. “Your father is a great flyer, himself. He’ll keep teaching you what he knows. Maybe, once you start going to school, you can learn how to play Quidditch.”

Lucio’s eyes went round. “Quidditch!?”

“Yes,” she said seriously. “But that’s for when you’re older, do you hear me? It’s a very dangerous sport, and students aren’t allowed to play until they turn sixteen.”

“But that’s so long from now!”

“Well, then that means you’ll have a lot of time to get better at it!”

Lucio wanted to argue, but realized he had something else to be cross about.

"You left without saying goodbye! Pansy told me!"

Hermione stroked his cheek. "I didn't want to wake you. It was very early."

Lucio's pale blue eyes regarded her curiously. "Where did you go, Mummy?"

"I went to see some old friends," she said slowly. "They died a long time ago."

His brows lowered. "Died?"

"They're not alive anymore. Not like you and me."

"Who were they? Does Father know them?"

"They were very good friends of mine from school." She let out a long sigh. "Yes, your father knew them."

Lucio stared hard at her. She knew her eyes were red and raw and her face and hair were a mess from grief.

"I'd like you to come with me to visit them, someday," she said.

He nodded.

Lucio did not know the word for grief, and hadn't ever really dealt with it yet at such a young age. He knew anger, and sadness—those he *had* felt before, like when he had lost his favorite toy after a visit to the village and never got it back, or like when father went away on long trips and Lucio missed him very much.

Sadness was a different thing. It was heavy, and he could sometimes sense it around his mother, even when she was happy. He didn't know why she was sad, when she had him and father and Pansy and such a big house. He had asked Pansy once if she ever got sad, and she had said yes but when he asked her why his mummy was so sad sometimes, Pansy hadn't answered and instead found a new game for them to play.

It was all so mysterious.

But here was that sadness again, and he remembered when he had been hurt and sad, and how it had helped to have Pansy or Mummy hug him, and he wanted her to feel better so he hugged her, pressing his head against her chest.

"I love you, mummy," he said.

Her breath caught, and her arms wound around him, holding him close.

"I love you too, Lucio," she said, "more than anything else in the whole world."

"Even Father?" He asked, slightly surprised.

She didn't answer, and stroked his hair.

Draco was waiting in the library with Martin when she walked in, changed back into that damned green gown.

Here was the first test. Hermione's heart was bound to implode. Her hands were cold and clammy.

Does he know something happened? Is he wondering why I took so long? Can he sense my lies?

They both stood as she approached, Draco scanning her face, his expression mildly concerned as he took in the ravages of her crying.

"Good afternoon, my Lady," Martin said, bowing.

She barely managed to nod at him as she walked past.

She went straight to Draco, burying her face into his chest. She had asked Pansy to use a crying charm on her before leaving the bedroom. Pansy had asked no questions, but knew her determination to get her magic back. She had added her own touch by tousling Hermione's hair prettily, so it looked just messy but effortlessly and enticingly so; she had (with Hermione's permission) cast a quick freezing charm in the room so that Hermione's nipples were stiff and peaked when she met Draco in the library. She had also offered to reduce the puffiness around Hermione's face and the redness in her eyes, but there Hermione had said no. She wanted the rest to be real. He would face the effects of her pain.

But I'll use your favorite parts of my pain against you.

He was immensely pleased when she went to him at once, she could tell. His arms wrapped around her for a moment before he cupped her face in his hands and looked at her weary, tear-stained face before staring intently into her eyes, seeing the pain there.

"I'm sorry," he said softly, his lips pressing onto hers.

Hermione accepted his kiss eagerly, clutching at the front of his robes as the crying charm did its work. She felt his erection stir against her and wanted to smile. He slid his tongue into her mouth, taking advantage of her need in her grief. She let him, though she wished her nails were talons she could slit his throat with.

When they broke apart she wiped at her eyes, flushing deeper, as if in shame. He saw that reaction and his hands gripped her harder. He pressed his erection harder against her, as if he wanted to take her there and then and didn't care that Martin was there.

I bet you would, she thought.

"Do you think you can sit for the painting today?" He murmured.

"Yes," she said, turning her head to look at Martin, who was busying himself in preparing his palette. She twisted in just the right way to allow Draco a good look at her cleavage in the flimsy silk of her gown. She felt his fingers toy with her nipple as she spoke to Martin, jerking slightly at her husband's touch.

"I hope the wait wasn't too long," she said, remembering just in time to not apologize, as Draco would chastise her over it later.

"I am at your beck and call, my Lady, Martin said, bowing again." If you summoned me at midnight to paint, I would do it."

She smiled at him. Draco had bent down to suck at her nipple through her dress, teasing it with his tongue. His hand palmed her other breast, massaging it gently. A flicker of desire kindled inside her. She willed it to snuff out.

He only likes my grief when it benefits him.

She caught Martin's eye. He had gone very red. She turned her head to face Draco.

"Draco, don't," she said firmly. She braced her hands against his chest and pushed gently. "Not now."

He straightened, his hands on her arms in a restrictive grip, reminding her who was in control.

We'll see about that.

"I'll come get you, once this is done," he said. "I'll be with Lucio until then."

He kissed her hungrily and left.

Hermione assumed her position on the chaise. The damp spot Draco's mouth had left over her nipple was still very visible.

"May I ask if you're well, my Lady?" Martin said, studiously mixing paints on his palette with a knife.

"I wasn't, but I'm feeling better, now," she said, relaxing into the seductive pose Draco had forced her into. "I went to visit some friends I haven't seen in many years."

"That sounds lovely," he said, slightly distracted. She heard him begin to paint, finding comfort in the soft sound of brushes stroking against canvas. "Did you have a good time, my lady?"

"Not particularly," Hermione said, closing her eyes. "Visiting graves doesn't make for a merry visit."

He stopped painting. "Forgive me, my Lady, I shouldn't have asked."

"There's no need to apologize," she said gently, her voice smooth. "You didn't know."

He began to paint again silently. Hermione sat and reflected.

She had just begun to wonder where Lucio was and what he was doing, when Martin spoke up again.

"Are you happy here, Hermione?"

She looked him square in the eye.

"Ask my husband, and he'll tell you what he thinks my answer should be telling enough," she said softly.

"I thought as much," he said. "I'll confess I've wondered, but I didn't want to assume when I didn't know the whole story."

She nodded.

He opened his mouth and then closed it quickly, as if not knowing what to say.

"Don't be afraid to speak," she said. "I am not him."

Martin hesitated and then put his brush down onto his palette.

"How did this come about, my Lady? Has he put you under some sort of spell?"

"Many," she said, brushing her hair from her face. "To make sure I don't run away again."

"Again?"

Hermione touched her throat, where the emeralds were cold and dug into her skin.

"He was killing me," she said, her voice faint. "He was squeezing the life from me. I had to get out. I tried so many times..."

Martin was shaking his head, horrified.

"*How* did this all happen?"

"We went to school together," Hermione said. "We hated each other. Things changed on his side rapidly. He abducted me several years ago when we were still in school, and forced me into marriage while I was unconscious."

"That ring..."

She gazed down at it.

"He gave me a diamond and emerald chain." She smiled bitterly. "He tells me I'm his equal, yet he's collared and leashed me and taken my power away like I'm the one who can't be trusted."

Martin stepped forward slowly. She hated the sympathy in his eyes.

"Is there anything I—"

She held up a hand. "Please don't."

He looked confused. "My lady?"

"Too many people have been hurt or killed for trying to help me. I won't drag another body with me." She smiled. "I don't need another hero."

"Well said, my love," Draco's voice came from behind her. Cold hands slithered onto her shoulders, gripping tight. Hermione closed her eyes and sighed.

"Always listening, aren't you."

"I just came in to see what you wanted for dinner," he said.

"Liar."

She raised her hand to touch his, and to her relief, his grip loosened a fraction.

"Trying to steal my wife, Faulkner?" Draco asked, his voice like steel.

Martin balked. "No, my Lord. Never."

“You seem to be getting comfortable with her,” Draco accused. “Do you wish to be acquainted with my dungeon?”

Martin’s palette almost fell to the ground. He caught it in time. “No, my Lord. Please forgive me. I was only curious...”

“Curious about what?” Draco hissed.

“He wanted to know the story of our relationship,” Hermione said, stroking his hand, hoping it would calm him. “I was filling him in on it.”

Draco said nothing for a moment. Martin was pale, his eyes locked onto Draco’s who was likely to bore a hole through his face by his stare.

“Did you tell him that I killed your former lover? And my best friend, who helped you run from me?”

Martin went paler still.

“No,” Hermione murmured.

“Did you tell him how I raped you to consummate our marriage?”

“No.”

“Hmmm...” he said, sounding so casual that it grated Hermione’s nerves. “What about when I infiltrated Hogwarts using the identity of someone I’d killed, just to see you and dance with you for a few moments?”

She couldn’t speak. She shook her head.

“You left out so much,” he said, his hand coming up to cup her jaw from behind. His thumb stroked her bottom lip.

“I’ll let you off with a warning,” he said after a long deliberation in which Martin had been left tense, looking like he might throw up. He had looked briefly at Hermione, who was trapped in Draco’s grip but calm, trying to reassure him with a look.

If he wanted you dead, you already would be.

“Thank you, my Lord,” Martin said, bowing deep. “Thank you. I swear I meant no ill.”

“Liar,” Draco said, grinning. “I’m only keeping you alive because I want these portraits done. Anger me again, and you’ll rot in the bowels of my dungeon. Your hands will be the first part of you to go.”

“I know you want my wife,” he continued. “I won’t punish you for that, so long as you don’t act on it. Dream all you want, you’ll never have her.”

When the session was over, Draco brought Lucio into the studio as Martin was leaving, and ordered him to stay for dinner. The dinner was quiet, and Lucio babbled happily about his lessons, and going to a muggle playground the day before with Pansy, while Hermione said and ate very little.

It was if nothing had happened at all. Draco questioned Martin more about his past and his art, and Martin showed them all examples he had brought with him, his hands trembling all the while.

Hermione had ruminated over her graveside visit through most of it. She had briefly thought of asking Neville to Obliviate her, too, before leaving the Burrow, but decided against it. Draco had only ever invaded her thoughts a handful of times, and had not done it in years. She had never wondered why or cared to, having more pressing matters to focus on. She supposed it was another form of violation and he had decided he violated her enough in other ways, so she could keep that to herself.

She suspected he didn't want to see or feel the true extent of her misery and pain. Either that, or he was afraid she might not be able to stand having that one last bastion of her self taken away from her.

Either way, she was now grateful for it. He was cocky enough to assume he was unbeatable. Well, she would stoke that ego to get what she wanted. She would be the wife he had wanted all those years, not only in body but in spirit and behavior, as well.

She made herself gaze at him from time to time during dinner, and made sure he caught her. His eyes were dark. He wet his lips

He took her to bed after Martin left and she bid goodnight to Lucio. He kissed her gently, his hands on her back.

"Your friends might be gone, but I'm here," he said softly to her. "I always will be."

"I miss them," she admitted, closing her eyes as he kissed her forehead.

"I know you do. But leave them in the past, Hermione. You have a family now."

I had a family, then.

"Let them go," he whispered.

Never.

She gripped his robes.

"We'll be the strongest family to ever grace this fucking country," he breathed into her hair. "We'll make our own laws. Rule beside me, Hermione. Rule *with* me. I'll give you the world."

"I don't want the world."

"Rule with me," he repeated. He kissed her cheek, her lips, her nose, her closed eyelids. "Be my queen, Hermione." His hands roamed over her body. He pulled back to look at her as she opened her eyes. His hands cupped her face. Their noses touched, their breaths mingled.

"Please."

The word hung in the air between them, a heavy chain weighing them down. He stared intently into her eyes. The fire had started in the hearth—Hermione hadn't even realized but it flickered loudly, its amber light casting shadows around the room.

Heart pounding, she gave a nearly imperceptible nod. He noticed and breathed in sharply, his hands tightening around her to the point of pain.

Without a word he lay her down and peeled that dress off her, her breasts his first target, her lips his second, while his other hand worked between her legs. She welcomed it all, clutching his arms, his hair, his ass, hatred burning in her blood as he pumped inside her as deep as he could go, as if he wanted to breed her that very night.

Of course, he wasn't so foolish as to believe that in one day she had completely overridden her hatred and dislike of him. She knew that and felt it, too, that slight disbelief as she'd moaned his name and let him handle her how he wanted, pulling her legs over his shoulders, almost bending her in half as he pushed and pushed, groaning, his head falling back in pleasure, but his greed and lust always won out in the end. She pushed him onto his back and rode him hard, grinding herself against him; his hands bruising her hips, his mouth wrenching open to gasp and moan.

She could blame it on the grief later, if he questioned her.

Let it start here, she thought as he buried his head between her breasts while he throbbed inside her, filling her. She rode him to completion, her body quivering on top of his while he moaned. Before she had finished completely he flipped her over and onto her back, entering her again from behind. Hermione gripped the sheets, trying to quiet her moans as Draco pressed himself flush against her and thrust, becoming rougher until the pain was on the brink of overriding the pleasure.

"Slow down," she hissed, turning her head to glare at him.

He smiled. "Of course, little bird."

She managed to get her hand underneath her to play with herself. He watched greedily, and after he'd come again, brushed aside her hand and pushed her back down to let his tongue do the work, his arms hooked around her thighs. Hermione writhed on the bed and panted his name, gripping handfuls of his hair.

Let him think he's finally breaking me down, and that it all started with the sex.

It made sense, after all. She couldn't fake suddenly being in love with him after him having told her how her friends had died because of him. But he knew that while she loathed him, she still enjoyed the sex from time to time (when he wasn't vicious), and she would feed into that belief.

She pretended to fall asleep immediately after, making sure to turn away from him, as if ashamed of her desire for him, as she had done so many times before. He noticed and let her keep her distance but draped his arm around her, his hand spread on her ribs, thumb grazing the heated underside of her breast. She made sure not to flinch, but relax under his touch. Let him read into that whatever he wanted.

She had been good at acting, long ago. She distantly remembered Ron telling her so. She was not the sort of person to let a skill go to waste.

He was immensely pleased, she could tell. She had finally said yes. Not to loving him, as they had already struck deals over it, but on joining him.

What will come of this?

What will he have me do?

She heard Draco's breathing deepen behind her. His breath ruffled her hair. Thinking fast, she placed her hand over his again where it lay on her ribs.

In response, he slid that arm underneath her and hooked it around her waist, and drew her to him, his other arm wrapping and pressing around her chest, so that she could hardly move.

"I love you," he whispered, and kissed her shoulder.

Hermione pretended to have fallen asleep.

A/N:

Please review!

7. The Stranger pt 1

Slow updates will continue, be warned!

Seven.

When she awoke the following morning, a gift lay on her belly.

It was contained in a sturdy, slim box, wrapped in a ribbon.

He was nude and sitting on the bed beside her, stroking her hair. She made sure to lean into his touch as she awoke, stirring slowly, knowing his eyes were watching her body move underneath her covers.

A lot of work, having a satyriasis for a husband, she thought drily.

When her eyes landed on the box she frowned then looked at him, pushing herself up so that her covers slid down to pool in her lap.

He gestured for her to open it.

The box was wider than it needed to be. He had done that intentionally to fool her, but she didn't realize until after she had opened it.

When she saw what was inside, the gasp and smile of delight that the gift elicited were not faked.

She grabbed her wand from the box and planned to kiss him and kill him in the same breath, but the moment she touched it, remembered her wand could not function while she still wore his ring. A crushing thought, but it was so familiar to hold it again, so relieving, even though it felt cold and dull under her touch.

Still dormant.

She tried calling up her magic quickly, hoping she might be wrong, but again, there was that feeling inside her of coming up against a sort of wall that trapped her magic inside her.

Disappointment washed over her, but she chased it away quickly.

Did you really expect it to be this easy?

Still, it was better than nothing at all. She let Draco kiss her.

"It's a start," he said, smiling. He stroked her hair. "You still won't be able to cast magic until I take that ring off you. But if you continue to behave, you'll be able to use magic again like you once did. And I'll teach you how to do it without your wand, too, like me."

Hermione kissed him again, pushing him back until he was leaning against the headboard.

"Thank you, my Lord."

Draco cupped her face in his hands, returning the kiss. When they broke apart, he brushed his thumb against the corner of her mouth.

“You’re welcome, little bird.”

They went down to breakfast. Hermione found she had no appetite. Lucio was sleepy, not saying much, stirring his porridge without much intention of eating it, except for when Draco reminded him to take a bite. She watched it quietly, a tinge of dread fraying at her calm, though the scene was peaceful.

“Are you alright, my love?” Hermione asked Lucio, a furrow in her brow. “You’re so quiet today.”

Lucio’s stirring of his porridge ground to a halt. He rubbed his eye. “I had a nightmare.”

Draco paused while eating, and looked at his son curiously.

“What was it?” Hermione prodded, her voice gentle. She reached out and put her hand on his arm. “Was it very scary?”

Lucio nodded, looking down at his breakfast rather shyly.

“Why didn’t you wake us?” Hermione asked, reaching out with her other hand to brush his hair back and feel his forehead. A little warm, but nothing out of the ordinary. His cheeks were a little sticky from eating.

“I was afraid of seeing a ghost,” he replied, looking almost ashamed of being afraid.

Draco paused with his fork halfway to his mouth. “A ghost?”

“I read a book that had a ghost in it,” Lucio said. “Pansy said ghosts are real, and she told me of the ghosts at Hogwarts.”

“She frightened you.” Draco’s voice was flat. A shiver ran through Hermione.

“No,” she began, but Lucio cut her off, speaking more loudly.

“She didn’t,” he protested. “I remembered a story a boy told me once when mummy and I went to the village. It was about a man who hurt a lady, and the boy said they live around the village, but no one really knows where.”

Hermione’s eyes locked onto Draco’s. His face remained neutral, but as their gazes held, she saw a twitch in his mouth.

“Really,” was all he said. “Did you see that in your nightmare?”

Lucio shook his head. “I didn’t see anything. I was scared. I heard scary sounds.”

Hermione kissed his cheek, though she had gone cold. “It’s alright, sweetheart, it was only a nightmare.”

Lucio nodded, then looked at Hermione.

“Have you ever hurt anyone, mummy?”

Hermione frowned and glanced out of the corner of her eye at her son. What had prompted this? She was starting to suspect there was something else he hadn't told them about his dream.

"Sometimes," she admitted slowly. "Sometimes I was so mad I wanted someone else to hurt. Sometimes it was by accident. But it never feels good, my love. Remember that. Hurting someone else never solves any problems."

Lucio absorbed this for a moment and then, accepting her answer, looked at Draco.

"Have you ever hurt anyone, daddy?"

Draco took a drink of water, leaning back in his chair. Underneath the table, he extended his legs, until they touched Hermione's.

"Yes," he said, placing his hand over Hermione's. She stilled. "Your mother's right. Hurting people isn't good. But sometimes it's necessary. It's up to you to decide when is the right time, and when isn't."

A bird sang outside.

Hermione opened her mouth to argue, but he gave a warning squeeze of her hand. Her hand flared with pain. She grit her teeth.

Lucio was frowning. "I don't want to hurt anyone."

"You will," Draco replied, sounding so sure that it made Hermione bristle, even knowing he was right. "Whether you mean to or not, you will, and it won't just happen once. Maybe you meant to, or maybe you didn't. But it will happen, and you can decide whether you feel guilty or not, and what the right thing to do afterward would be."

His grip on her hand loosened.

"The best you can do is to always be considerate of others," Hermione said, trying to smile. "If you're angry with someone, count to ten or take a deep breath. It's okay to leave the room. Or talk to them and tell them why you're angry."

What a lie. What hypocrisy, to be lecturing her own son on hurt and guilt when she and the man beside her had never adhered to these lessons when all they ever did was hurt each other, even if it was more him than her. Draco could not have missed such irony, either, for his thumb was stroking the back of her hand as if to soothe a hurt. What shame, to sit there and join hands as if they were a united front and lie through their teeth, and dole out advice like they were the paragons of virtue.

Draco sensed her turmoil and turned to her before he began to eat. He caught her eye.

"You're not hungry?" He asked, his gaze measured as if he knew what her answer should be and was waiting for her to realize it too, and take it.

Hermione reached out and touched his shoulder, not breaking the stare. Approval marked his expression, even as through her own expression, she made known she was not happy about the earlier discussion. She let her hand linger there for a moment and then took it away to curl around her fork, and eat a chunk of cantaloupe.

She had left her wand on the dresser. She had resisted the urge to carry it with her, but her gowns had no pockets and she never wore robes inside, anyhow.

Without magic, it's useless. Draco would probably tease me if I did bring it with me.

She was sore around her hips and it almost hurt when she walked. There were bruises around her wrists from when he had pinned her down. Draco had been so hungry the night before. He had ravaged and savored her all night. She had known better than to hold back, too.

The guilt of finding pleasure with him had faded long, long ago. She had learned to accept that it was one of the very few ways she was allowed to expel her pent-up frustration and tenseness. Ideally, she would never have him (and possibly anyone else) touch her again, but what other choice did she have? It was either find a release with him (albeit temporary) or have it unwillingly and not get anything from it whatsoever. At the very least, at least she couldn't deny that Draco was good at 'helping' her in that regard. She supposed the whole ordeal would be more unbearable if he only cared about his pleasure. She supposed it was a sick sort of relief that he actually was considerate about giving her pleasure most of the time.

She shifted in her seat. Other parts of her were sore, too.

Draco was watching her.

"Restless?" He asked, a curve to his lips.

She nodded.

"Why don't you go lie down?" he suggested, taking one last bite of his omelet. His eyes lingered on hers. She knew he was thinking about the night before.

Lucio was peeling a grape, inspecting the texture of its skin between his fingers.

"Don't play with your food," Draco reminded him. Lucio made a face and ate the grape.

"I'm finished," he said and pushed his plate away. "Can I go play, Father?"

"You may," Draco called for Pansy, who appeared at the door. "It's hot outside. Remember to stay hydrated."

"Yes, Father." Lucio rose from the table and went to hug Hermione, who kissed his cheek.

Once his and Pansy's footsteps had faded away, Draco and Hermione sat in silence.

He was still watching her. Not daring to show her irritation, she finally looked up from her cup of tea.

"What are you thinking?" He asked before she could ask that very question.

"Just what I've gotten myself into," she replied, putting down her cup.

Draco smiled, showing all his teeth. Hermione wasn't sure, but sometimes, she thought they looked like they were growing sharper.

"Something wonderful," he said.

He took her into his study after breakfast. Hermione went to sit in front of his desk as she usually did but instead he led her to his chair, holding her hand, and helped her sit into it. He circled back 'round the table to sit before her. Hermione watched him carefully all the while.

"Where do you want to begin, my love?" He asked, crossing one leg over his knee and leaning back in his chair.

Hermione hesitated, a thousand replies surfacing beneath her lips. Where to start? It made her head swim. "I-I'm not sure."

"Don't fret," he said. 'There's so much to cover. But there is something I've been wanting to share with you for some time.' He paused. "It's rather grim."

Hermione felt her pulse quicken.

"Grim for who?"

"It involves someone you knew once."

Hermione felt a strange tightness in her throat.

Who else has joined the ranks of the dead among my friends and family?

Her vision blurred. She cleared her throat.

"Tell me." She swallowed. "Please, my Lord."

Draco hesitated.

"You remember the Weasley twins."

Her hands had gone clammy.

"Yes..." She was looking at the wall, her eyes wet. Draco sensed her bracing herself.

"You remember the last battle, how they went missing after."

"We all thought they were dead, but they came back," she said, remembering the weeks of sitting tense and miserable in a mostly silent Burrow.

"Yes, sweetheart, but one of them died last week."

The first tear fell.

"Who was it?" she whispered. "Fred, or George?"

Fred, the one who had once stumbled upon her crying in an alcove because of something hurtful Ron had said, and had comforted her and forced his brother to apologize for the day after? Or George, the one who had seen a seventh-year boy slipping some strange potion into her drink while she hadn't been paying attention during the Yule Ball, and "accidentally" knocked it out of her hands, and had never confessed until much later on?

Tell me it's neither, she wanted to say to Draco. Tell me they're both alive, them and every last person who I love is still living, and let it be true, and I'll never fight you again. Bring them all back to life and I'll happily suffer for the rest of mine if it means I didn't cause some of this.

“Fred.”

She remembered him the last time she’d seen him; brimming with energy, talking happily to his older brother over breakfast.

She’d never imagined one of the twins would die before the other. She’d never thought of them dying at all. The two of them had tricks and magic in their favor for as long as she’d known them; that and the spirit of mischief. What happened when one half of a whole broke off?

She had to force the question out of her throat. “How did it happen?”

“He killed himself.”

She let out an audible sob at that, and he quickly wrapped one arm around her and pressed a hand to her cheek. She struggled briefly, but he held her close and she subsided, shaken.

“Why did he do it?”

He rubbed her back. The pressure was eerily comforting. Hermione couldn’t remember if he’d ever been so empathetic when someone on her side passed away. Usually, he was indifferent. “There was no explanation.”

“*Liar*,” she said, pushing him away suddenly. “No explanation? You think your slaughtering half his family had nothing to do with it?”

Draco felt his anger rise. “If he hadn’t gotten himself captured at the battle he’d have died with the rest of them.”

Hermione stared at him in horror.

“It may not be easy to hear, but it’s the truth. I wasn’t going to let everyone live, Hermione. You know me well enough by now that it shouldn’t surprise you.”

Furious, she gripped the lapels of his coat. “*They were family to me!*”

He looked at her without emotion, his hands tight around her arms. “You have a new family now.”

She threw her hands down. “Not by choice.”

“They never could have protected you from me.”

“No,” she agreed because it was true. She’d accepted it. “But with them it was real.”

His eyes flashed. “Do you want to know what happened to the twins while they were missing?”

“Did you have anything to do with it?”

“Not directly.”

Hermione shuddered and turned her head towards the wall, her eyesight blurred by tears. Her head had begun to hurt. “I can’t look at you. You disgust me.”

Draco laughed.

"The news doesn't stop there, Hermione."

"Let me go," she said stiffly.

"This concerns the remaining twin."

George. Poor George. How was he now without his brother? It tore at her heart to think about, to picture one without the other.

She tried pulling out of his grip. "I don't want to hear any more."

He pulled her back. "He's still alive."

She paused.

"And well?" She asked.

"I figure."

She still refused to look at him. "And you're not planning on killing him?"

Draco kissed her. She turned away. His lips dragged against her cheek. "The thought hasn't crossed my mind yet."

"Don't you dare."

"That's as close to a promise I can give, Hermione."

She tried to leave. Draco jerked her closer, earning a grunt from her. His hand at the back of her neck forced her head close. She stiffened.

"I've spared enough lives for you, wife," he said coldly. "But you can't plead everyone's case. They don't all deserve it."

"They don't deserve having their lives taken from them by someone like you."

"Don't speak of things you know nothing about," he snarled. His fingers wrapped around her arms so tight he felt he might snap her bones if he squeezed harder. Her eyes were on the wall opposite him now, distant, pained.

"Is that all, my Lord?" she asked stiffly.

"No."

"Then kindly let me go. Your temper bores me."

She had fought not to let the words get out, but couldn't help herself. Even if he would punish her for it, it felt good sometimes to let some of that anger out, even if it could never hurt him as much as he hurt her.

Hermione felt his anger in the way he held his body and braced herself.

Well, there went any progress I made in the last two days, she thought furiously. *Idiot.*

His hand gripped the collar of her dress and with one jerk of his arm, he tore it away from her, halving her dress into two shredded strips. Hermione winced.

“Don’t act surprised, sweetheart,” he said coldly. “You brought this on yourself.” He pulled the ruined garment from her body, leaving her nude. Hermione resisted the urge to cover herself.

Draco placed his spread hand over her sternum. She met his eyes at last. Her jaw was set, her eyes like ice. He applied pressure, pushing her back towards his desk.

“Lie back on the table.”

Quivering in the cold, she did. Regret filled her. She should never have angered him. But it was so easy to forget.

Besides, she thought bitterly to herself as he came closer. How much else do I have to lose?

His cold hands wrapped around her ankles and traveled up the length of her legs, then spanned over her thighs slowly. Hermione clenched her jaw and tried to regulate her breathing.

His hands left her, and he circled around the table slowly. Hermione’s hands lay flat on the table—more than anything she wanted to bring them up to her chest or her stomach. It was so awkward just laying there. But that was what he wanted her to feel.

He was standing behind her now, at the end of the table where her upper half lied. “You know I have to punish you. Tell me why that is.”

The room was cold now that she was naked. Had it been from the start, or had he made it colder? Her nipples had stiffened. Her skin pebbled.

“I insulted you.”

“I wonder when you will learn to control that mouth of yours,” he said softly, ‘but I won’t lie to you. I’ve always enjoyed that sharp tongue.’ He stroked her head. She jumped. “Simply learn the right moment to start fires, little bird. I love your heat, but you can’t burn me. You only make trouble for yourself.”

Suddenly her arms were raised up and over her head by magic, and it felt like invisible handcuffs held her wrists close together, attaching themselves to the side of the desk, to the effect that her arms were bent at an angle and held above her head, and her hands fixed to the side the table. She gently tried rotating her wrists to ensure there was enough room, that the blood flow wasn’t cut off.

He had walked to the other end of the table, and when she wasn’t paying attention, had restrained her legs as well, thought they mercifully weren’t bent like her arms.

“You probably think I’m going to take you now,” he said. “But I won’t. You’re going to wait here until I come back, and if I feel like it I’ll fuck you, and when I feel like you’ve learned something from this I’ll release you.”

Hermione stared up at the ceiling. “For how long?”

“As long as I want.”

“How am I supposed to go to the bathroom?”

“The House Elf will help you. He’ll bring you something small to eat every now and then.”

“What about my son?” she asked, but he didn’t answer and left. Hermione sighed angrily and let her head drop back down onto the table, not even wincing from the pain.

Time crawled. Hermione didn’t bother keeping time, knowing it would only make her more impatient. Toffee had already fed her by hand, a small bread roll and slices of fruit, saying nothing when she’d asked him about where Draco was, or if he’d seen her son.

She was content to lay there as long as Draco was not in the room with her, though her arms had begun to ache and her body began to hurt from lying on the hard wooden surface for so long. She shifted her weight from one side to the other, tried arching her back now and then, stretched her legs and wiggled her toes to keep herself busy, and to keep them from falling asleep.

Hours after that she’d been allowed to relieve herself, and shower afterward.

Since there was nothing to do but think, she slept after being returned to the office. Thinking too much was dangerous. If she took a wrong turn, at any moment any innocent thought might give way to a memory of a life she once had, or someone she’d once known, when she was free. It was never pleasant, especially after the news she’d received earlier, so she was eager to keep away from it, and if sleep was the only option then she would do it without complaint.

The only problem was how uncomfortable her sleeping arrangement was. It was easy to fall asleep, but harder to stay that way when her body longed for a soft mattress and warm sheets. The surface underneath her went from hot to cold, it seemed, while she slept, and never in a preferable pattern. It made her irritable and more regretful that she’d gotten herself into this.

It was well into the night—it must have been, considering the amount of time she’d been lying there (she’d given up and had begun counting the hours (9)), that she’d woken with a start to find her husband there beside her, stroking her softly.

She’d stiffened at once, expecting him to say something, or to kiss her, perhaps, but all he’d done was stroke the skin along her stomach, her hips, her legs, her arms, and chest. His hands stroked circles around her breasts, let his knuckles drag over her nipples, up and down, up and down, until they hardened and her breasts ached for more. She didn’t know what to do but closed her eyes, and hoped that if he wanted sex that he would get it over with. But he didn’t.

His hand went further down her body and stroked her thighs all around, his fingertips glided again and again over her hipbones, they traced the soft line of hair that grew into a thicker patch where her legs met, and played with the curls there, dipping down to touch the place where her thighs met.

Hermione tried to sleep through it, but couldn’t focus when his hands were so careful, so thorough. He never penetrated her but always his fingers were there, lingering at the front of her lips, giving tiny, gentle strokes that made her wet despite her mood.

His hands remained there longer than she wanted, never wavering, always with the small strokes, and though it wasn't enough she felt her body responding to it, felt a kindling of heat spark inside of her, the twitches of her body that gave away her desire. When he felt it he applied more pressure, pushed his fingers closer to her vagina, and helpless, she moaned.

He stopped. His hands came away from her and without another word, he left the room. Relieved, Hermione relaxed, annoyed with herself that she'd given in so easily. She should have known he would play something like this. Now she would have to be on her guard, but how the hell was she supposed to fight back when she was tied up like this?

I should never have opened my stupid mouth.

When she woke up the windows were open and it was clearly morning, and Draco was there again, his hand repeating the same actions he'd done the previous night, and she was wet again and moaning while she'd been asleep, her body itching to tug at her restraints to get closer to him but she forced herself to stop, to keep still. She was barely able to wonder how he hadn't woken her up earlier—had he charmed her to remain asleep? He didn't seem to mind, but this time his fingers pushed inside her and stroked her there too, the rough pad of his thumb carefully administering attention to her clit, rubbing little circles, and behind the methodical look in his eyes was a burning fire, and she turned her head away and pretended her jaw was glued shut so she couldn't make a sound.

He went about it slowly, drawing her closer and closer to the edge, and when her breath just started hitching a certain way and the smallest convulsions of her body began to pop up he slowed down considerably or stopped altogether, so that she immediately lost her place and it would take several more agonizing minutes to get back to the point where her toes would start to curl but to her frustration, he would stop again and leave her fighting not to squirm. And just when she'd cooled back down he was back again, stroking and stopping until she wanted to scream her frustration, but she kept absolutely silent and refused to give him what he wanted.

Toffee returned later that night, cleaned and fed her, and it was back to the table again. Hermione bore it all well enough, but the silence was becoming too much to bear.

"You'd find him insufferable, too," she said to Toffee once, as Toffee was securing her back to the table. "I know you can't quite understand why I don't love him, but you would hate him too, if he'd killed everyone you loved, and locked you up, and forced you to live a life you don't want. I know you're happy to serve him, but I'm not. He's never been cruel to you. But you know what he does to me, and yet you still think I'm the crazy one for not revering him like everyone else does."

Toffee said nothing, and exasperated, Hermione tried again.

"How is my son?" She asked. "Can you at least answer *that*?"

Toffee had not replied. She hadn't even looked at her. Knowing Draco had ordered the poor House Elf not to communicate with her during a punishment, Hermione continued to seethe, her eyes growing wet with anger.

Draco was back again that night, continuing his attentions to her, never speaking a word. Hermione bit her tongue and gave him nothing. He left, but by then she was nearly delirious with want, and on the brink of begging for mercy. Her legs were stiff and sore from holding them still for so long, her arms ached and longed for a good stretch, her back hurt and she just wanted to lie in a soft bed somewhere warm. When Toffee had come for her and taken her to the shower, Hermione had waited until Toffee Apparated away to slip her hand between her legs and worked herself eagerly. Her climax came too quickly—she was left panting against the cold tile of the wall while the hot water continued to wash over her body. She did it one more time before finishing her shower, and when Toffee came to collect her and dry her off, Hermione found herself calmer than before, but as soon as she was taken back to Draco's office, she felt that frustration rise up from inside again.

When morning crested and she awoke, Hermione was beyond impatient to get up and leave the room, to see Lucio and Pansy again, but didn't dare say a word to him, feeling instinctively that even if she tried she would lash out in anger again, and the punishment would become longer or harsher.

No need for that, she told herself in the silence of the room, listening keenly and body tense, waiting to hear his footsteps outside the door, denying to herself that she almost anticipated it.

Not like this was the first time she'd ever gone through one of his punishments, either. In the span of their marriage, she had been subject to plenty of *corrections*, as he sometimes called them. By far, this was among the tamest.

He had beat her in the beginning. So badly, she could hardly move the day after, even if he'd had her healed after it. That was before Pansy had come along, before Lucio, even. She remembered her skin black and blue from his fists, from his kicks, her throat raw and torn from her screams of pain. She remembered the feel of her ribs cracking inside her and the blood. She was thankful those had been a few occasions, and far between.

After her few attempts to kill herself, the beatings had mostly stopped altogether. But the psychological and emotional manipulation and the rapes had never ceased. He liked to threaten her with a whipping but had never gone through with it—she supposed he didn't want to run the risk of scarring her too badly, even if Toffee and Pansy were more than capable of healing her.

On one occasion, he had used the Cruciatus on her. There was still a gap in her memory from that day—she knew he had Obliviated her, but not why. Had he continued to torture her? Something worse must have happened to warrant the Obliviation, seeing as it was something he had almost never done until that point.

But that's not true, she realized. *He Obliviated me well before any of this happened after he marked me for the first time.*

She smoothed her hand along the old scar in the crook of her elbow. She never looked at it if she could help it.

There had been the Isolation Room. That had been a favorite of his for a long time. Whenever she angered him, he had her shut in there and given food, and always threatened to have her in there for as long as a month if she didn't learn to behave. But he was too alone, he

craved her too much to keep her away from him for too long, so her stays in the Isolation Room had always been considerably shorter than he intended at the start. She expected the same would happen here, especially taking into the matter the fact that he had visited her at least once every day since her confinement.

Bored, she tried stretching on the table as best as her restraints allowed. Unsatisfying. The light from the window almost blinded her. She tried shifting away on the table to avoid it, but that didn't do much. The room was warmer now, funnily enough. Beads of sweat at her temples and rolled down into her hair.

She hadn't seen Lucio in days. Hermione wondered what lie Draco had told him to keep him from asking where she was. Perhaps she'd just 'gone to visit a friend' again.

Draco's office stood silent around her, caging her. It was plainly decorated, with some maps up on the wall, sheaves of parchment stuffed into a bin beside the numerous bookcases. She knew that if she looked into a drawer on the right side of the desk, she would find those photographs Draco had taken of her the year before. She knew he had marked one of the maps in small 'x's' with red ink all the places they had lived briefly. She knew that if she tried opening any of the books in the office, or any documents or letters on his desk, that the letters and numbers would bleed together into an illegible mass of ink and confusion.

Thanks to Pansy, she knew that despite Draco's promises, there was still a small supply of bottled Amortentia tucked away in a secret drawer.

The door opened, and her breath hitched as Draco walked in, staring at her.

He stood at her feet.

"How fares my beautiful wife?" He asked.

"Fine," Hermione said coldly.

He smiled. His hand reached out and traveled over her leg. The heat of his hand was enough for her to start getting wet. Hermione cursed silently in her head.

"Were you waiting for me?" He asked softly. "Tell me."

Hermione hesitated, and nodded, heart beating fast in her chest.

His hand traveled up farther. Her legs shifted in anticipation. Her eyes closed in resignation.

"Toffee told me something interesting," he said off-handedly, his hand smoothing over her inner thigh.

Her toes curled and uncurled in anticipation and need, her back wanted to arch and offer herself to him. She was so wet, her lower lips were swollen and tender from his caresses, pulsing and aching for more. She would have done anything he'd have asked of her for release.

"She says you touched yourself in the shower without my permission," he said, and Hermione went still.

"I wasn't aware I needed your permission for that, considering it's *my* body," she said before she could check herself.

"Normally, I'd be ecstatic if you shared that with me," he admitted, his voice husky. "You don't know how I've hoped for it. But I figured you still weren't comfortable enough to."

"Hence why I did it alone," she said waspishly, but despite her tone, she moaned quietly as his finger trailed along her slit.

"Show me now," he said, his finger teasing at her. "I want to see how you do it."

Her restraints for her arms vanished, and she stretched and sat up warily. Draco's eyes were heavy-lidded, watching her tirelessly.

"Show me," he repeated, more of an order this time.

Hesitant, she reached down. He pulled his own hand away and stood back, watching as she, blushing fiercely, pleased herself. Her thighs were trembling—she could feel it coming quickly again. Her breath was uneven, her eyes closed tight to ward off her husband's piercing, studious stare. She couldn't help her moans. She rubbed at herself faster, adding pressure—she could feel her muscles contracting, trying to grasp for something that wasn't there. Her feet were still restrained, but her hips were pushing up into her hand as her climax climbed to its peak.

"Stop."

She froze, unable to move. Draco was smirking, his eyes molten.

"I think the rest can wait for later, don't you?" He asked. "Now lie back down and wait for me. I don't think it'll be long, now."

He snapped his fingers, and her body, acting on his order, lay back down and was restrained once more. Hermione almost cried with frustration. She was pulsing, aching for relief. Her clit was so swollen and sensitive it almost hurt to move her legs too much.

"Don't you dare finish without me. I'll know," he said over his shoulder and left.

Her pulse was still racing. She was still incredibly wet, her fingers damp and warm. She struggled to even her breathing.

"Rotten, cheating prat," she hissed under her breath.

Hermione slept very little that night. She saw now that to sleep was dangerous, as that was usually when he chose to visit her. Though Toffee had already come and gone and she'd eaten and showered, her body still tingled and pulsed, unsatisfied that she'd had no release. She ignored it, forcing herself to think of other things unrelated, not bothering to count the hours that passed because each one only brought him closer, and her body was painfully aware of it.

When she awoke, she was alone. The windows were open and it was morning again and her body was freshly clean but she was alone.

She stretched as best as she was able, and gasped in pain as her calf cramped. It hurt quite badly—she let out a wavering moan as her leg throbbed and she let herself go limp, wishing she could sit up and massage it, but there was nothing to do but lay completely still and wait for it to pass and for her muscle to relax again.

Her arms were so stiff it was painful to move her upper body much. Hermione wished Draco would release her so she could let her arms rest—though all she'd done for the past two days was sleep she felt so tired and uncomfortable from being on the table for so long that she felt she might implode if she had to spend another day on it.

After her meal, the windows were still open and she was watching how the sunset was changing the shadows around the room, wondering if Lucio was wondering where she was.

She forced herself to keep awake for most of that night, fearing the moment that door would open, and she would be absolutely helpless to his plan. But the curtains opened just as the sun was rising, and she'd only had three hours of sleep and still, there was no visit. And the fourth day ended just the same as the third.

That he was doing this intentionally was obvious, and it was torture. Hermione hated the desk she was on, she hated that door across the room, and she hated above all that her body still begged for attention.

She kept herself awake for some odd hours that night, but when she awoke on the fifth day her husband was between her thighs. Hermione gasped in pleasure, overwhelmingly aware of his tongue pressing against her, the searing warmth of his hands on her thighs, pushing them apart, and the rest of her body was barely warming up but she pulled at her restraints, wanting to press him closer.

Her jaw slackened as his fingers pushed inside of her easily, crooked at the knuckle, and began to rub her so slowly her hips automatically pushed up into him, demanding more. She felt his smile against her flesh.

“Good morning, wife.”

She was pulsing, restless, hungry. His fingers weren't enough and he knew it—he lowered his tongue to her again, and she moaned her approval.

Draco pressed a quick kiss to the inside of her thigh.

“Did you sleep well, my love?”

She refused to answer, and for that, he pulled back from her and she, flushed and irritated, pulled harder against her restraints.

Draco smiled. “Did my little bird lose her voice?”

“No.”

“I'm glad to hear it. I see you haven't learned your lesson yet, however.” He turned to leave.

“No-!”

“No, what?”

"I'm sorry," she said, without looking him in the eye. "Please forgive me, my Lord."

He was at her side at once, his hand cupping her jaw, forcing her to look at him.

"You've had enough?"

"Yes, my Lord." She would never get used to that unsettling stare. She fought not to look away from him.

"You want me to unbind you?"

"Yes."

"What else do you want, Hermione?"

A blush threatened to appear, but she refused to be ashamed. How many times before had he pulled a trick like this? It always ended the same way. It was better to get it over with than to suffer for longer.

"I want you to fuck me," she said, her self-hatred growing deeper with every word, and when he didn't answer, she realized her mistake. "Please, my Lord."

He bent forward, smiling, and kissed her forehead. "You'll have to bear it a little longer, sweetheart."

"No... please!" She couldn't stand it any longer, but his attentions were focused again on her lower body and she was strung so tightly from his earlier tortures that it didn't take long for his tongue to bring her closer to the brink.

Hermione's eyes screwed shut—her whole body felt like it was being wrung out from the inside—her mouth formed an 'o', her head fell back and her body arched upwards. Draco began to slow down and she let out a pleading moan for him to reconsider.

She had been fearful that he would deny her release again and had hoped that with her submission he would be generous, but she'd been wrong. He stopped abruptly, and she fell limp onto the table, wishing she'd never said anything at all. He would have just left and she would be in peace.

She looked up, and her stomach twisted in excitement as she saw him unbuckle and take off his belt. His oceanic grey eyes churned as they looked at her.

"You can stand now, sweetheart."

How? She wanted to say but then realized that he'd gotten rid of her restraints at that very moment. She sat up stiffly, wincing, and moaned in pain as she stretched her arms.

"You're not hurt?" he asked. She shook her head. "Good. Come here."

Hermione approached him slowly, trying to regain her sense of balance since she'd been lying down for too long.

Draco motioned for her to kneel at his feet and she paused.

The floor was cold against her knees, but it felt good to engage the muscles in her legs, though she did it gingerly for fear of pulling another muscle. His cock had already hardened, and swollen, it hung heavy before her. Hermione didn't allow herself to think anything and

taking it in her fist, she guided it into her mouth, fighting the disgust that compelled her to spit it back out. She worked her tongue over him, thinking of anything else but what she was currently doing.

The taste, the texture... if it were anyone else she would be able to bear it better. After the first few times he'd made her do it she'd resorted to pretending that what was in her mouth belonged to someone else, but there was never any effective way of forgetting that this was Draco, and this was not her choice.

You were just begging him to fuck you, liar, sniped the malignant voice inside her. *Don't twist it.*

She *had* begged, but sometimes the lines were blurred so thoroughly it was hard to tell. She supposed it didn't matter now much anyway. She shivered at the thought.

How much worse do things have to get?

Unfortunately for her, his size made blowing him difficult task for her, and though she'd gained experience since her kidnapping there was still only a limited window of time she could perform before the pains in her jaw prevented her from going longer. Draco was cruel, monstrous, even, but despite the many injustices he'd done to her, he chose to dole this one out far less frequently than others because he knew it caused her more pain, more so emotionally than physically. It was his favorite for humiliation, and of course, he must have deemed it *perfect* for this moment.

His hands went into her hair and grabbed thick fistfuls of it, he let his head hang back, and let out a low groan as she began to bob her head on his length. Her jaw was as slack as it could be but already there was the beginning knot of a cramp starting up in the lower hinge of her jaw and it was hard to breathe. She used her tongue, let it swirl around his cock and laved it over the head repeatedly, dipping it between her lips and drawing it back out slowly, causing him to groan more loudly. His hold on her hair tightened, inadvertently bringing her closer to him and surprised, she braced her hands against his thighs. In the midst of the movement, a sound of surprise fell free from her mouth, vibrating against him, and he hissed out an oath.

"Look at me," he ordered.

She looked up, sucking her cheeks in slightly as she tried to take him in deep. She felt him shudder and grow harder against her. She let her nails dig into his thighs to let him know she was near her limit; her jaw was starting to feel stiff and she was getting no pleasure from the act—she desperately wished for it to end. She pulled free, let his length slip from her mouth to catch breath, some strands of saliva and precum dripping from her tongue and she made to wipe it quickly but his warning tightened grip on her hair forced her to reconsider so she swallowed it hastily, let the rest drip down her front.

Her hands were still on his thighs. Refusing to look at his still very erect penis that was still in front of her, she tried to stand and looked up in alarm when his hand on her shoulder kept her down.

"This time I want you to finish," he said. Already his hands on her head were guiding her closer to him.

Hermione fought her anger back. There was no point in fighting it.

Learn the right time to start fires, he'd told her. Well, she would take that lesson to heart.

When she took him in her mouth again there was an energy to her movements that surprised them both. To him, he knew the truth behind her sudden eagerness but embraced it for his own pleasure. Hermione closed her eyes and wished she had the courage to clamp her teeth down, to sever it in half.

She took him deep into her throat, fighting not to heave or cough, and was rewarded by him pushing deeper, forcing the tears from the shelter of her eyes. She gagged loudly, her stomach lurching. Draco shuddered violently, she felt the ripple of thigh muscles beneath her hands—he grabbed her tight by the hair again, each hand bunched at the base of her skull, and began to thrust into her mouth, guiding her head with his motions.

Hermione did her best to relax her throat and successfully managed not to vomit, at least. Though she would have liked that she supposed that would have added more to her punishment, and she was currently humiliated enough. Her jaw was quite sore—it hurt to have her mouth open so wide. The sounds coming from her would have been quite comical if it weren't for the fact that he was orally raping her.

And to think you wanted him badly only minutes ago...

He manipulated me, she reminded herself. *I didn't want this.*

"Hermione," he whispered hoarsely, and she doubled her efforts, knowing he was close. "Ah, fuck—"

He pushed in deep one more time, hitting the back of her throat, causing her to gag again, but it didn't stop him from finishing and more tears came as she felt the familiar hot salty fluids run down her throat. She coughed, nearly choking on it but knowing he would be severely displeased if she lost it all, she struggled to let it subside. She swallowed it hastily, focusing on not letting her disgust show on her face. It always felt unpleasant to her—she shuddered as it went down.

He pulled her back up without giving her a chance to regain her composure and crushed his lips to hers. Hermione whimpered.

"Good girl."

Now she was beyond a doubt he was trying to provoke her to lose her temper again. Was it another test? Or was he really in the mood for a fight?

"Lie down on your front."

No, she wanted to say, *I've had enough. You've already humiliated me.*

She was shaking and she was sure if she spoke she would have trouble finding her voice. She wanted to go hide somewhere, or block the memory altogether, as she'd done before when his punishments were too much for her.

But he was already pushing her down gently onto the floor, and her breasts and stomach met the cold surface and she began to shake harder, more in anticipation than from the cold. As if mocking her anger, her body was already warming to his touch; he pushed her thighs

apart and his finger dipped in to test her and found her only slightly wet. He licked his fingertips and brought them to her clit and began to rub, just in the fashion she'd done the night before. Hermione buried her face in her crossed arms and bit her lip.

"Do you like it?" He asked slyly.

When she took too long to answer, he pinched her, and she yelped, but the hurt was gone quickly. He rubbed her softly there for a moment before delving his fingers into her, just enough to spread her arousal.

She nodded, and that was enough for him.

He climbed over her, one hand stroking his cock, the other hand squeezed her ass.

"Do I still bore you, Hermione?" he asked.

"No," she sobbed. Her face was engulfed in flames. He slapped her suddenly, a sharp sting across her bum. She jolted.

"*No, my Lord,*" she repeated shakily.

"You can't lie to me, sweetheart," he crowed softly into her ear. "But I encourage you to keep trying. I greatly enjoy punishing you." And then he thrust into her, and Hermione, after being teased and tortured and made to wait for so long, let out a hoarse scream.

It didn't take long for either of them to finish—to Hermione, it felt like it happened in a span of seconds. He filled her and stretched her and she was almost senseless with want, not bothering to hold her moans back because it was already obvious that he'd won—he'd gotten the apology from her and the admission that she wanted him, after all. She'd had a half-willed idea to fight it as best as she could, as it had worked for her a few times in the past, but this time she couldn't bring herself to push back—her body demanded release and finally found it, and when it hit her it was so strong and overdue that she couldn't even scream but shook silently underneath her husband, her body clenching him so tight that he came immediately after, driving himself so deep into her that she had to reach back and push her palm into his chest to keep him from hurting her more.

Afterward, he pulled out from her and stood, immensely satisfied. She was sitting up and wiping the tears from her eyes; the most beautiful flush covered her face. Draco watched her avidly. She was radiant. Her hair was wild and her eyes half-stunned and her ass had a reddened imprint of his hand on one of its cheeks and his seed was slipping out of her even now—he reached for her and bit her gently on the neck before kissing her.

"Thank you, my Lord," she said hoarsely. Her whole body throbbed and she felt so weak—the good kind of weak—but she wished it had nothing to do with him.

He cupped her cheek. "I had half a mind to leave you there for another day," he murmured. "I was starting to think you'd have held out for a week."

At once, there was a jarring knock on the door. Hermione jumped.

"My Lord, you have a visitor," came Pansy's voice.

"Excellent," Draco said. "That will be all, Pansy."

Hermione scrambled up on unsteady feet and immediately looked around for something to cover herself with. Draco strode to the door and opened it.

“Good. You’re here.”

“Don’t!” Hermione hissed at him. Draco ignored her. The stranger stepped inside and she froze, trying to cover herself, a frantic blush overtaking her face. The only thing to hide behind was Draco’s desk but she assumed he would be going near there and while she didn’t know what was going on she didn’t want to be near it, especially since he was heading there now. The stranger wore the standard uniform of the New Legion, including the black mask fashioned into a crude imitation of a demon with silver markings lining around the eyes and nose. Whoever it was approached the desk without looking at her once, as if unaware of her presence. Hermione tried to go around them in a wide berth but the door was shut and she didn’t dare call attention to herself for fear of what might come.

“Unmask,” she heard Draco order the stranger.

“Thank you, my Lord.”

Hermione paused. Something felt off—but she couldn’t worry about that now when she was so exposed and filthy and quite possibly in danger. Still covering her breasts with one arm and her vulva with the other, she backed into the darkest corner, trembling. She wanted to ask Draco what was happening but there was a curious look on his face that she knew didn’t bode well for her.

He caught her eye for a brief second as she tried hovered, petrified in the corner, and winked.

She knew above all else he was extremely possessive. So why let this stranger in while she was in this state, just after they’d had sex? Draco himself was still nude, too, and not in the least bothered by it, though as she watched he tapped his fingers on the table once and suddenly he was clothed again in his usual black and gold robes.

What about me, she wanted to ask. The stranger still hadn’t looked at her and she was turning redder by the second, fearful of what other plans Draco might have for her punishment. She thought it was over already—what was next?

“Come closer, sweetling,” Draco called to her, but his eyes were on the stranger, who was taking off his mask. From what she could see he had brown hair, grown to his shoulders and was badly in need of a trim. “Don’t be afraid, this is a meeting between friends.”

*Your friends are **not** my friends*, she wanted to say, but not wanting another punishment, instead grappled for something else to say.

“I’m not-I *can’t*,” she said. “I’m not decent—Draco, I don’t know him.”

The stranger had turned, but she couldn’t see his face or reaction at her nudity because she shrank back into the wall, hoping to hide herself in shadow, looking at the wall beside her in embarrassment but suddenly Draco was there and had her by the arm and led her to the front of the room where the stranger was, and because he had her arm she wasn’t able to cover all of herself. Hermione tried to will away her blush. It was the most humiliated she’d ever felt in her entire life.

Freshly used and covered in marks. Bedraggled. Utterly punished. So it hadn't ended after all. Now she truly *was* sorry, because even if the manipulation and the rape weren't bad enough, she'd never thought he would bring another person into it. Would this stranger punish her, too?

"Isn't she beautiful?" she heard Draco ask the stranger, the pride in his voice repulsive. "You have my permission to speak freely."

The voice was oddly strained like they had damage to their vocal chords. "Like none I've ever seen, my Lord."

"Did you hear him, sweetheart?" Draco asked her. "Thank him for the compliment."

She hated him with all her heart. The *both* of them, even if the stranger was merely following orders and could not refuse, even out of propriety. If he'd said something less satisfactory she had no doubt Draco would have punished him for it. But this stranger had *no right* to look at her, even if Draco commanded him to, not when she was so broken. This was too much. And Draco had promised he would never share her with another person. This had to count as sharing.

"Thank you," she said hoarsely, relieved she had not stuttered. It was enough that she was blushing like a virgin. She would not stutter or blubber her way through the end of this. She knew Draco probably wanted her to put her hands down and stare the stranger in the face without blushing, to meet him proudly and without self-consciousness, but she couldn't, she *couldn't*...

"Lower your arm, Hermione," came Draco's order, and she clenched her jaw, quelling the violent flash of anger that filled her then, and moved her hand away from her vulva, baring herself fully to the men's view. She could not fight him. She could not say no. She'd never felt so low, so like someone else's property.

"Don't be afraid," Draco repeated. "Go greet my guest properly."

"Draco, please!" He had let her go and she felt foolish trying to cover herself again when they had already seen what they wanted, but Draco's earlier victory was still fresh in mind and she didn't want one of his blasted friends to have the honors as well.

"He won't hurt you, sweetheart. He's got more reason to be afraid of you than you of him."

The stranger shifted.

"My Lord, if I'm making her uncomfortable then I will come back any time it is more convenient for you," he said, bowing.

"No. I confess I forgot we were to meet today," Draco said, "but it's all the better that you're here. I imagine it's been some time since the two of you have seen each other."

What did he mean? Hermione knew only some of his Death Eaters by face or name, and this man was probably not someone she knew judging by the fact that a good portion of Draco's new followers were new recruits. From what she had seen and heard of him, he sounded totally unfamiliar.

But Draco was waiting, and she wasn't going to add more fuel to the fire at her feet when he'd just punished her, so she stepped forward, completely reluctant to follow Draco's order. She forced herself to look at the stranger, more closely. At first, she saw a stranger, but there was something that forced her to keep looking, so she did, and when a few seconds had passed, she gasped and felt all the color drain from her face.

The only reason the man looked to have brown hair was because of the dim lighting in the room, coupled with the fact that it appeared his hair hadn't had a good wash in a long while, and it smelled that way too. His eyes were blue, but not the blue she'd once known. They'd grown darker, and the lines around his face hinted at hardships she would never have wanted for someone she'd known for so long. Though he'd always been a few years older than her he appeared twice that age now—were his twin still alive there would be no more difficulty telling them apart. Hermione tried to picture him laughing now with the face he had, and failed.

Suddenly Draco's words and hints came back to her and she staggered. Draco reached for her but she caught herself, and nudity forgotten, she stared in shock at George Weasley.

He stared back, no trace of shame or regret in his eyes, just a dull, sad recognition. There was a scar running from his cheek down to his neck, still fresh. His eyes were lowered but it wasn't her breasts he was looking at—she caught his emotionless stare at the scars of Draco's bite, still imprinted into her skin. Then he looked up. There was a faint trace of shame in his look. His mouth withered into a grim, humorless shape that was meant to be a smile.

"Hullo, Hermione."

"Oh, Gods." Tears were coming up again but she'd had enough of them so she fought them back as fierce as she could. So this was Draco's plan after all, because she didn't believe for one second that he'd forgotten about the supposed meeting. She'd thought the humiliation had already passed with him making her beg for sex. Perhaps that was part of it, but the true humiliation was staring her in the face.

George had called Draco 'my Lord.' He had been wearing a Death Eater's mask when he came in. She glanced down and saw the black, silver-detailed robes that identified Draco's followers.

"No..." she moaned. "No, no, no... *George...*"

Her knees buckled again and George, having received the signal from his Master, caught her with his arms and supported her to stand upright. Hermione held onto him, praying that it was all a nightmare, that it was actually a stranger and not her old friend. She felt his erection and knew that was why Draco had wanted her to hug him but didn't care. His arms wrapped around her loosely, comforting but awkwardly aware of the presence of her husband and his Master.

"Is this not a pleasant surprise?" Draco asked. "I didn't think you'd be meeting one of your *family* again, Hermione, and most certainly not like this."

"Congratulations on the marriage, my Lord," George said.

"You caught us just as I was finishing correcting my wife," Draco said nonchalantly.

“Yes, I’m afraid I overheard some of it, my Lord,” George said, having the grace to look embarrassed. “Had I known you would be busy I would have been glad to come again another time.”

“And miss reuniting with an old friend?” Draco’s tone had the slightest edge to it—Hermione’s skin prickled. “I wouldn’t have had you miss it for the world.”

And there it was.

He’s testing him, Hermione realized. He doesn’t trust him.

Draco came forward, and George’s arm fell away from her, to be replaced by Draco’s sliding around her bare waist.

“I know you have questions, Hermione,” he said, “but George here’s just arrived from a long trip. He’ll be staying with us for a spell, and I’m sure he’ll be more than happy to answer them when he’s freshened up and well rested.”

George bowed. “I’m obliged to you, my Lord.”

Draco grinned. “Hermione’s been missing her old family lately. I’m sure the two of you have lots of catching up to do. I’m sure she’d be interested in finding out what you’ve been up to since you last met.”

There was a sinister threat behind those pleasantries. Hermione looked at George, fear creeping into her heart.

*What has he done to you? What have **you** done?*

Draco called Toffee to get George settled into a room. Draco led Hermione away from the room just as Toffee was escorting George out of it. She sensed Draco’s triumph in the air, clashing with her confusion.

“Lucio will want to see you right away,” Draco was saying to her. “Let’s get you washed and dressed, first.”

She heard none of it. The world had narrowed down. Her ears felt plugged. She couldn’t blink.

George met her eye, his expression morose as he walked past her.

You’ll learn, that look said to her. You’ll learn.

A/N:

Another long chapter for my patient readers. Thank you so much for reading! I’ll remind you again that updates will be slow, but I’m chipping away at this story as best as I can. For news, questions, and updates, please consult my blog (link in profile).

Please don’t forget to leave a review!

8. The Survivor's Lament

Eight.

IMPORTANT AUTHOR'S NOTE AT THE END OF THIS CHAPTER.

The Survivor's Lament

Hermione hardly slept that night, and Draco was well aware of it. They lay in bed together, his arm slung over her, his body curved protectively around hers. She hadn't said a word to him since George had left them in Draco's study and surprisingly, he hadn't seemed to mind.

He had come into bed an hour after her when she was still awake. She had spent much of that hour tossing and turning, her eyes raw and tired, her body aching with a dull intensity.

He had slid in behind her, his hands instantly on her, hot and strong. He had kissed her neck.

"You'll speak to him tomorrow," he murmured. "Get it out of your mind and rest."

"It's not that easy," she said, her voice monotone, struggling to keep her temper from flaring.

"If he tries to leave, or refuses to answer your questions, I'll see to it that he changes his mind," Draco said simply, "but he'll be here when you wake, my love. I guarantee it. You have nothing to worry about."

She shook her head.

It's impossible, arguing with him.

"Are you controlling him?" She asked. "Blackmail? Imperius?...Are you paying him off?"

Draco chuckled. "None. He joined me quite of his own will."

She scoffed. His hands went tighter around her. "He'd never."

"Do you think it's so impossible?" He asked, his voice going lower. "Do you know him that well, then? Have you forgotten that you came back to me of your own will and have stayed since?"

"I came back because you threatened to kill what was left of my friends if I stayed," she said coldly. "And I'm only staying because of Lucio, and that promise I made. You left me no other choice."

"You've *always* had a choice, Hermione," he said firmly. "It's only out of the good of your own sweetheart that you chose to have them spared, and damning yourself to me in the process. You could have tried to run again, or stayed with them and tried to defend yourselves."

“Either way, the result would have been the same as it is now,” she snapped. “No matter what choice I took, my friends and family are dead.”

“But then you have happy accidents like George, who is still alive and extremely relieved to see you again after so long apart,” Draco said. “Would you rather have no one survive?”

“Don’t try to play this game with me,” she hissed. “I know what you’re doing.”

She tried to scoot away from him to the farther side of the bed, but his arms were like iron around her, and so fuming, she crossed her arms over her middle and tried to ignore her husband wrapped around her. She closed her eyes and hoped sleep would come quickly.

Draco didn’t seem to mind. He stroked her skin slowly, pausing once to prop himself up on one elbow, loosen his other arm, and bend down to kiss her on the edge of her mouth.

George was not at breakfast the following morning. Hermione was oddly relieved by this. She realized she didn’t want him to have to sit through the awkward spectacle she and Draco made every morning, playing the role of family. Married couple sitting down to breakfast with their child, as if she weren’t a hostage and he wasn’t the monster who had put her there in the first place.

Lucio seemed a little glum that it was raining so heavily outside, but Draco reminded him that he had tutoring that day anyhow, and that was more important than playing outside.

Draco received some post that morning but had it sent to his office, all except for the *Daily Prophet*. He scanned through it quickly, the paper hovering in front of him over his plate, its papers turning rapidly as if he already knew what each page would say, and was only checking for confirmation. Hermione watched him warily, a knot in her stomach. She tried to read whatever she could from the front page, but as before, the words and letters jumbled together into one messy printed alphabet soup at the bottom of the paper, and resigned to her disappointment, she merely turned back to her tea and sipped at it, wondering if there was something in particular Draco was searching for.

When he was done, he folded it back up and held it out to her.

“Would you like to read it, my love?”

Hermione stared at him, eyes wide. Draco stood and placed the paper before her. He tapped it with his finger and at once the full text and images righted themselves, all within a blink of an eye as if her problem had been that easy to solve all along.

Hermione drank it in. Draco stroked the back of her hand. She took his hand and pressed it, and looked up to smile at him, the man who had raped her the night before.

“Thank you, my Lord,” she said.

Draco didn’t return to his seat.

“I’ve got business to attend to in the Ministry today,” he said. “I’ll be there until late tonight, perhaps. Lucio, your tutors will be here very soon. Pansy will come to collect you when it’s time to begin.”

“Yes, Father,” Lucio said, looking rather displeased.

To Hermione, he said, “Martin will be here at noon. Pansy will bring him in. You know the routine. You’ll have the rest of the day to yourself.”

She nodded and stood, going to kiss him goodbye.

“I’ll be expecting you to cooperate tonight,” he breathed into her ear as they embraced.

The knot in her stomach tightened. She nodded and watched as he left. Her breathing returned to normal once he was out of sight.

She sat back in her seat, eager to rid her mind of the memory of the night before and read the entirety of the newspaper, but she had only just unfolded it and landed eyes on the picture of the Prime Minister on the front page when the sound of footsteps demanded her attention.

She had expected it to be Draco at first, perhaps having forgotten to announce some other plan for the day, or that he wanted another kiss, but it wasn’t.

It was George.

Again, she had almost not recognized him. His hair had been cut and washed, and his hair was its true red. The scar along his face was more vivid than the night before. He was thin but tall and still cloaked in the colors of the damned: black and gold. He looked a little younger with all the grime and unkempt hair cut and washed away, but there was still that haunted look in his eyes that aged him.

“Good morning, my Lady,” he said, bowing, just as Hermione had almost given in to the urge to run to him and embrace him.

“Good morning, George,” Hermione said, trying to smile, and shoving away the awkward thought that he had seen her completely nude the night before. “Please, come sit with us. Are you hungry?”

She had almost forgotten that Lucio was there until she caught his eye and saw his apprehensive expression as he looked at her and then George.

“Lucio, darling,” she said, “this is my old friend George Weasley. We knew each other for many years before your father and I were married. He works for your Father, now.”

George, seeing Lucio, went pale, but he summoned up a smile. Hermione guessed Draco had conveniently not told him he had a son.

“Pleased to meet you, little Lord,” he said.

“You and mummy are friends?”

“Oh, yes,” George said, and accepting Hermione’s invitation, sat down at the table opposite her. “We went to school together when we were young, although I think she was closer to my brother Ron than she was to me.”

Hermione’s heart wrenched with pain. She felt a dart of anxiety run through her as if Draco was there and had heard George’s words. She wanted to take him aside and hiss Draco’s rule to him—

We don't speak the names of the dead here.

It only ever happened when Draco himself said them, and that was rare enough. It only spurred his anger and jealousy. If this continued, Lucio would ask his father questions innocently, and then she would pay for it later.

But it was too late. Lucio turned to Hermione. "Ron? Who's that, mummy?"

Hermione took in a breath.

Draco's gone, she reminded herself. *Your fears are irrational. This was bound to happen, and Draco probably knew we would talk about it.*

"Ron was a very dear friend of mine in school," she said, glad her voice was level. "He was George's younger brother."

"Don't forget Harry," George said, cracking a smile, and for an instant, she flashed back to their summers in the Burrow, when he'd crack jokes at supper and have them all choking on their soup. Pain flared in her heart.

I can't handle this.

"Harry?" Lucio was asking. "Mummy, who's that?"

George looked at Lucio and frowned. "Who—?" He looked back at Hermione, his smile faltering. When he saw her grave face, he looked incredulous, and his voice dropped to a whisper. "He doesn't know?"

"Harry was another very good friend of mine," Hermione said to Lucio, but it was too much, too sudden. The room was spinning around her. All she could think of were those graves. "Excuse me—"

She pushed back her chair and fled the room, walking as fast as she could. She heard the scraping of chairs behind her.

"Mummy?" Lucio called. "Mummy?"

We don't summon the dead here. It kept repeating in her head. *We don't, we don't, and there's a reason why.*

Lucio knew, now. He would have more questions. Draco had forbidden her from the beginning to tell him about Harry or Ron, and even though she had been furious that he would dare to forbid her from telling her own son about the most integral people of his own life, she had eventually come to the realization that perhaps it was better off that way. It was too painful, too shameful, to tell her son the story of her life before her capture, the adventures and magic, and independence, the brave, beautiful people she had known. She could picture his excitement and eagerness to learn more and then as he would grow older and wiser, realize how boring and pitiful her life had become since then, and even if it was not by her own volition, he didn't know that. He would pity her or become embarrassed by her. He would adore his powerful father more and more, and her influence over him, her only true influence over anything inside this *damned* house, would fade.

She found herself by the window in the corridor. It looked out into the gardens and she stopped abruptly, the warmth of the sun a welcome comfort on her cold skin. She wiped at her

eyes though she had not cried and tried to regulate her breaths.

She heard footsteps behind her.

“My Lady, are you alright?”

She shook her head. “*Don’t* call me that.”

“I’m afraid I must, or my Lord will punish me,” George said.

“I can’t stand it,” she said and turned to look at him. “To be Lady Malfoy wherever I go, like they’re trying to wipe my past away. I’m afraid one day I’ll have heard it enough to forget who I am. He can call me whatever he likes, but as far as I’m concerned, I am *still* Hermione Granger.”

George nodded slowly. “Of course,” he said. “I’m sorry for everything you’ve been through.”

“Don’t ever apologize for that,” she said, a tad too sharp. “That was my own fault, and his.”

She turned back to the window. He stepped closer.

“I’m sorry I left so abruptly. I-I had a rough night. I was overwhelmed.”

George nodded slowly. She stood utterly still and looked composed but for the wet glimmer in her eye. He could sense her agitation, however, like the beating of a frantic bird in its cage. It was upsetting. It reminded him of Fred in his last days.

George shook the thought away.

“He doesn’t know about Harry or Ron,” he said, pointing back to the direction of the dining room. “Your... son. He doesn’t know. About me, I understand. But Ron and *Harry*... why not?”

There was pain in his voice.

Hermione went to him and took his hands. There was so much pain in her eyes.

A bright stab of pain ran through their arms at exactly the same moment. George cried out and made to let go, but she, knowing it would happen because of her ring, had latched on and would not let go, even when the pain intensified. Draco would know, but she didn’t care.

“Eat,” she said. “Then we’ll talk. And explain everything.”

When they returned to the table, Lucio was expecting them. He had finished his food and had waited for them at the table, his bright, young face burning with questions unasked. Hermione went straight to him, trying to muffle the anxiety that spiked within her.

She cupped his face in her hands and kissed his cheeks as George sat down on the other side of the table, and after a second’s hesitation, began to collect food on his plate.

“Who’s Harry, mummy?” Lucio asked.

Hermione sucked in a breath, pulling away from him to sit back in her chair.

"Harry was my friend during school," she said. "Just like Ron. But Harry... he was more than my best friend."

Lucio's gaze implored for an explanation. Hermione didn't dare go further than that. This covered most of it without treading into dangerous territory. She wasn't ready to dive this deep so soon, especially with George as an audience—familiar or not, they had to have a long and lengthy talk before she revealed too much. He answered to Draco, now. She had to remember that and find out if she could trust him.

"We were all best friends," she resumed. "We did everything together. We got into a lot of trouble."

Lucio's eyes went wide. "Trouble?"

"We fought a troll, once," she said, smiling. George was grinning. A hollow, beaten grin, but she saw the spark of remembrance in his eyes. "At the start of our first year at Hogwarts. I was so afraid, but they helped me escape from it."

Lucio's mouth had gone slack. His eyes were like stars.

"A *troll*? Mummy, you fought a troll?"

"Yes," she said. "And many other kinds of creatures."

"What else did you do, Mummy?" Lucio asked, almost bouncing in his seat with excitement.

"He speaks very well for someone so young," George said, impressed, more to himself than to anyone else.

"I want you to remember this, my love," she said slowly, reaching out to smooth his hair. "We didn't do the things we did because we wanted to. We did them because we had to. There were people who wanted to hurt us, and we were just trying to survive."

"Hurt you?" Lucio asked. Trepidation crept across his face. "Why?"

Hermione struggled to find a proper answer. If she brought up Voldemort and Harry, the Prophecy and everything in between, they would be sitting there for days.

Draco wouldn't like it, either.

She was saved from that when Pansy entered the room.

"My Lady," she said, "the tutors have arrived. Shall I take Lucio to them?"

"Noooo," Lucio whined, crossing his arms. He looked beseechingly at Hermione.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," she said, despite her secret relief. "You have to go. Your lessons are important."

"I don't want to. I want to stay with you!"

"I'll still be here when they leave," she reminded him. "We can talk again later."

"Promise?"

"I promise." She helped him out of his seat and kissed the top of his head. "Be good and go with Pansy. I'll see you later."

When she stood back up, and he had just reached Pansy, she caught her eye. Pansy was looking at George, who was still at the table, without an ounce of surprise.

She knew.

Pansy seemed to sense her thought, and nodded, her face solemn and apologetic. Hermione nodded in answer. Why should she be upset? Pansy was also under Draco's command. He had probably bound her to be unable to reveal the secret to her without severe punishment. Hermione watched as Pansy took Lucio's hand in her own and exited the room.

Now they were alone.

Hermione went back to the table slowly. George was not eating. He watched her, half of the food on his plate untouched.

Suddenly the room felt colder than before.

"What now?" He asked quietly. "Should we do this here?"

She shook her head. "Come with me."

They exited the dining room and into the corridor. They said nothing for a while. Hermione led him through the manor. Except for the sound of their footsteps, the place was silent. They encountered no one else. Every room was cold.

"Is it always like this?" He finally asked.

"Mostly," she admitted. "Unless he has more of you over."

She hadn't meant for that to bite, but as they walked, and his robe flowed with his movement, she caught glimpses of the gold trim on it and was reminded to be careful, that he obeyed her husband first. She was always second on that order.

They had reached the Isolation Room. It had been some time since Draco had last put her in there, but it was exactly the same. A fire sprung to life in the hearth as they entered.

He looked at her, waiting for instruction.

"Sit," she gestured to the room. The bed, the armchairs by the fire. She had unpleasant memories on every surface of this room, where Draco had consummated his lust on many occasions.

"Won't you?" He asked.

"I'd rather stand."

He went to one armchair and sat, looking rather uncomfortable. She followed him there and stood in front of him. He watched her, wary, waiting for her to speak.

It took a moment for her to gather her voice again.

"What happened to you?" She whispered.

"It's a long story," he said. Even his voice sounded haunted. Hermione wondered if she ever sounded like that, too. "It's probably best if you sit down."

"I'll sit when I want to," she said firmly. "Now tell me everything."

He sighed. "After my Lord defeated Harry, everything went to hell. We were all in shock. We looked at his body, waiting for him to get up again and save the day, just like it happened with Voldemort. But it didn't."

"I didn't know you'd been seen there until weeks after. None of us saw you, except Neville, apparently. If we'd known, we'd have tried to take you with us, but that probably wouldn't have worked. More than half our numbers were gone. Once Harry went down, they started taking captives. Fred—Fred and I were separated. I was panicking. I couldn't find him. Harry was dead and I couldn't find Fred. That's all I remember thinking." He shook his head.

"Whether he was dead or alive, I was going to find him and bring him back home with me. That was all that mattered. I didn't know Ron had been killed until I saw them burning his body. They were burning all the bodies so they wouldn't have to bury them. Most of our side was gone or leaving, or dead. It was useless to fight back. And Malfoy was quick. He was burning, killing anyone who was stupid enough to still try and take them on, looking for any captives he could take. The only reason I wasn't taken by him was that you came along when he found Neville and distracted him, but I didn't know that until later."

"Did you get away?" She asked.

"Bellatrix found me," he replied, and his voice had gone hollow. "She had someone knock me out and take me to her house. They'd thrown me into a cell. When I woke up, some of my ribs were broken and I had trouble remembering how I'd got there. But I saw Fred in the next cell with his leg was broken, and that's when I remembered." He swallowed. "I didn't care what they were going to do to us. I didn't care if they were going to kill us. The only thing that mattered was that we were together. I told him I saw what they did to Ron. We didn't know what'd happened to Bill, or Ginny, or Charlie. By then, mum and dad had been dead for a few months."

Having seen their graves only a day before, his words bore into her like a dagger pressed deep. Hermione nodded, sniffing.

"How did it happen? Were they killed in battle?"

George shook his head. "Before. Mum was sick—we're not sure how it happened. She was fine one day, and then she wasn't. She said she hadn't been feeling well for a few days before that. I think it was Percy's death wearing on her. His, and Bill's. She'd stand there at home just staring at our clock, at their hands. When they'd died, their spoons went to Sleep and never moved again. She'd watch it for hours like she was waiting for them to switch to Awake at any moment. After she got sick, she insisted we bring the clock into her room, and she'd watch it when she wasn't sleeping. Ron and Ginny were taking care of her. We had Healers come and take a look but their medicines weren't working, and mum died two weeks later in terrible pain. Dad followed her three months after that. Natural causes, but I think he didn't want to live without her."

Hermione put her hand on his shoulder.

"I'm so sorry," she said, her voice heavy with emotion. "They were good, lovely people."

He nodded, sniffled loudly. "They were. It was hard, at first. I think I would rather have them gone that way than have them killed off by an enemy, even though it was awful."

"What about the others?" She asked. "I saw when Ron was killed. MacNair did it. I haven't seen Charlie in years."

"I saw Charlie at the battle before I got separated from Fred," George said numbly. "He said to look for Ginny, and that's the last I've seen of him. No body, nothing. They wanted to put up a grave for him, too, but I wouldn't let them. Not until there's hard proof."

"I'm so sorry," Hermione whispered. The Weasley's had been such a large family. Now, less than half of them remained. It tore at her heart.

"It's stupid to keep hoping, probably," George said, his voice worn and dull. "But I figure if you're still alive, there's a chance that Ginny and Charlie might be, too. We looked for Ginny among the captured in Bellatrix's dungeon. We saw some people from school, there—mostly younger ones we didn't know very well. Fred couldn't move, thanks to his leg. Most of us hardly knew each other, but we tried to take care of each other, and I was trying to think of a way to get out because they'd taken all our wands and broken them, and whatever was coming next wasn't good. We were there in the cold and dark for a few days, I think. We couldn't get out. We weren't given food. Half of us were dead by the time they remembered they had people down there. They pulled us out and chained us up so we could barely even walk. They had a Healer come in and fix Fred's leg, and then they forced him to come with us when he should have been resting. He got a bad limp because of that, and that was the only way they could tell us apart afterward."

He paused to catch his breath, and Hermione clicked her fingers.

Toffee Apparated into the room.

"Yes, Mistress?"

"Bring water, please."

"Yes, Mistress."

Toffee Apparated away and a moment later two tall glasses of water appeared beside each of them. A fa, sweating pitcher made a loud *clink* as it landed on the tiny table between them.

"Thanks," he muttered and drank deeply. He set the glass down and cleared his throat. The pitcher floated forth and refilled his cup.

As it did, he looked around. "This is your life, now, then." He sounded sad.

Hermione nodded, a grim set to her lips. She would tell him everything when the time came. She would lay everything on the table, and see if he would try to defend his Lord. She would know how to act next, based on that, but his turn was not yet done.

"What happened next?"

"Anyone who'd survived those few nights in the dungeon was made Bellatrix's slaves," he said. "There had been about ten of us at the start. When we were taken out of the cellar, there

were four of us left. She gave one of those girls to a friend of hers. She was crying, and Fred and I tried to stop it—there's no good reason why a mean, ugly looking sod like him wanted a girl less than half his age. They whipped us bloody for that right there, and when it was done, they were already gone.' He shook his head, a haunted look in his eye. "I still think about her. I didn't even know her name."

Draco's words from a long time ago floated back to her:

'There are others.'

Hermione closed her eyes. When would those words stop haunting her?

"There was another bloke with us—Bellatrix wasn't interested in him, so she gave him to the first person who asked. His name was Eric. Then it was just me and Fred. We thought she'd give us away, too, but we were wrong." He paused.

"Are you alright?" She asked.

"Yeah. It's just unpleasant to think about," he said. "I'm sure you know the feeling."

"Too well."

"They were still celebrating having won. They were drinking, eating, some were dancing. Malfoy wasn't there, but they praised him constantly, toasted to him. A lot of them had their own slaves, fresh from the battlefield. I saw a lot of familiar faces—I'd just fought alongside them days ago. Now we were all wearing chains. They tortured us a bit, just for fun. For laughs. And when they were tired of drinking and dancing, some of them stripped their slaves and had them right there, or shared them with groups." He swallowed loudly and shuddered. "It felt like it went on forever. I'd never been so angry in my life."

'There are others.'

"Did Bellatrix—did she?" Hermione asked.

"No." George cracked a dead smile. "That night, she didn't touch us, and there were some people who wanted us, but she wouldn't let them. Said she can't stand redheads and likes Weasleys even less, but she didn't like sharing what was hers. That changed later, but I guess for that one night we were granted one tiny miracle there. That's how I felt for a few minutes. Relief, as people were being assaulted around me. She saw that, and I think she couldn't stand that. So she had Fred and I wait on her all night. Feed her, give her drinks, take off her shoes when she wanted to be barefoot. The whole time, she talked about how most of our family and friends were dead or missing. We tried not to let it bother us, but it was hard. She talked a lot about you. She hadn't seen you or Draco in years, and neither had we, for that matter, but she loved to talk about the many ways in which he'd probably already killed you, and if it wasn't that she painted a very vivid picture of you all chained up in a dungeon somewhere, raped and beaten and inches from death."

He paused. "We hadn't seen you in so long some of us already believed you *were* dead. I think it was easier that way than still believing we could find you and save you. Of course, later on, we found out she'd been lying, and that you'd been seen at the battlefield, so when Bellatrix saw that it wasn't working, she told us about how she helped poison our mum."

Hermione grabbed his hand. Held it tight. Pain simmered along her arm.

"After that night, she changed her mind about using us," George continued. "She was being offered sums of money from people who wanted us, Fred and I, at the same time. She didn't care about the money. She didn't even need it. But she'd found a way to humiliate us, so she rented us out most nights, and she didn't give a flying fuck if we got hurt.' He wiped at his eyes. "It was a nightmare, start to finish. We were forced to serve men and women, e-even each other. And when we refused, we were tortured, and they put us under the Imperius, and then sent home, and tortured again and denied food."

Hermione covered her mouth with her hands.

"I'll spare you the rest of the details," he said, not looking her in the eye. "We endured. They beat us, and tortured us, and Bellatrix had us sleeping on the floor outside her room, cleaning her home... entertaining guests, but we were alive and we had each other, and that was all that mattered. Every day, every night, we'd think of ways to escape."

"Fred..." George said, his voice cracking. He swallowed. His face was absolutely hollow. Broken. "He started to fade. The first time they had us touch each other... that was the day it started. There was shame and guilt, at what we had to do. I tried to forget it every night. Put it out of mind. Think about anything else. Before then, we tried to tell each other jokes sometimes at night to make each other laugh, to try to forget what we'd done, what'd been done to us. We had to whisper, so the others wouldn't hear us. But after that night he stopped laughing. I never heard him laugh again. He got quieter and quieter until even I couldn't reach him. He wasn't eating. I tried to help him. I saved most of my food for him but he wouldn't take it. He wasn't there anymore. I tried to be there for him, tried to tell him we'd get out, but there was no way to even try, because they had us without magic and chained to each other, and fed us just enough so that we weren't starving, but we didn't have a lot of energy to begin with."

He stopped and took a moment to breathe. His eyes were red. Hermione waited silently, her stomach churning.

"The Dark Lord began to make visits to Bellatrix," he said. "He saw us one day and seemed too happy to have found us. He said it was possible to win our own freedom by joining him. We'd be able to see you, he said, and serve him, and never be sold off to anyone else again. We refused. We wanted our freedom and to see you, just not under his terms. But every night I thought about it a little more, and when he came back a month later and asked again, I said yes."

George went quieter here. Hermione, burning to know the rest, resisted the urge to press him on.

"I hadn't told Fred, because I knew he'd convince me not to," he said, looking at her as if expecting her to do the same, even now that it was too late. "But I was so tired of it. I was worried about him and knew we had to get out, because there was one couple who kept paying for us and they were getting crueler and rougher and I knew it was only a matter of time until they either seriously injured or killed us, and Bellatrix was taunting us, saying they'd offered to outright buy us from her, and she was tired of having us around, so she was going to do it."

"So I said yes to him Fred wouldn't say anything. I knew he wanted to leave too, just as much as me, but he didn't want to go with Malfoy. But he didn't want to be left alone so he

signed the contract too, and I was glad because I was ready to drag him out of there even if he didn't want to come with me. We'd thought Bellatrix would have been furious, but either way, she was just happy to get rid of us, so my Lord gave us some money and we stayed at an inn for a while, trying to think of what to do next. We spent days just lying around, not talking much, just happy to be out. Fred still wasn't himself, but I thought he'd get better in time. He was mad at me, and I felt and do still feel guilty over it but we were out, and that was all I cared about. We were being watched by Malfoy's people, so we knew we couldn't run away. After a week, we were taken somewhere to perform the initiation ceremony. He gave us the robes, and we got the marks, and in the end, after we swore our loyalty, we were presented with new wands."

He had his out, was looking down at it, the glare of the fire raging in his downturned eyes. It was black, with a gilded handle. Smooth. Featureless. Hermione vaguely recalled his original wand, with its defining features that had been so odd alone, yet the perfect complement to that of his brother's.

"When it was over, we went back to the inn. Our Lord was going to send us on a mission, our first task. We were going to head out the next morning. He'd given us a bag of money each to see us through, to find lodging and food and clothes for the mission, and then a more permanent place to live afterward when we returned. I wasn't excited about it, but I was ready to move on. I would have done anything to get the past few months out of my head, and I was eager to do it fast, because Fred still wasn't doing much else day to day, and I knew it was all haunting him, so I wanted to get us out and traveling and thinking of anything but that."

He paused and took a deep, shaky breath.

"That last night—" he stopped short again. His hands were visibly shaking. He tried again.

"That last night... he talked a little bit. More than I'd heard him speak in a month, I think. He started up and he didn't stop for a while and I was so blown over by it, I just let him talk. And me, the idiot, I thought it meant he was getting better."

"What did he say?" Hermione asked gently.

"He was just bringing up old memories. 'D'you remember that time we broke out of Hogwarts on our brooms?' And I said of course I did. He said he'd never been happier in his life then, or the day we opened up our shop. He said he'd never forget those days. Then he went to sleep."

George went silent for a long time after that, obviously struggling for his next words. Hermione found his hand and gripped it tight, not caring that the pain was making her head swim and her arm numb. She looked down at their hands joined together and gripped until she saw her fingertips turn white, the indents in his flesh from her pressure. He squeezed back fiercely, and if he felt pain from her ring, he showed no reaction, either.

"When—" He heaved out a dry sob, and took in a long, ragged breath. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

"When I woke up the next day, he was gone." He shook his head. "Gone. He'd used his wand on himself in the loo of our room at the Inn. No note, nothing. He never said goodbye."

He stopped again as if he was about to cry, and Hermione had expected it, too—he looked as if he were about to burst with sadness. A moment later, however, he blinked, shook his head again, and continued, although his voice wavered.

“I think the guilt got to him. I think it was driving him mad, what we’d been put through. That, and what he’d seen at the battle.” And I think he was too embarrassed to talk about it to me, his own brother. We both knew we had been forced to do it, and that it wasn’t our fault, but he still took it hard. The Dark Lord came, and we buried him out by the Burrow. I left for the mission that night. I was in shock. I didn’t know what else to do. I’d never been without him. I’m still not used to it. I thought it was better to surround myself with strangers than face the fact that I was alone and almost without family, without my twin. I kept seeing him everywhere I went, out of the corner of my eye. I completed my mission months later and reported back to my Lord. He uses me as a scout, you see. A spy, sometimes, too. He sends me off on missions, and I just came back from the latest one about a week ago.”

“What was your mission?” She asked softly, finally extricating her hands from his, though she needed help, as she couldn’t manage to move her numb hands at all. George realized her plight and helped settle her hands in her lap, eyeing her ring warily, as if he could sense that was where the pain had come from.

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you yet,” he said, and she nodded.

Of course not.

“I’m glad to see you’re alive,” he said. “You’re probably glad to see me, too, but I know we both wish we weren’t still breathing. That would have been easier, wouldn’t it?”

“Once, maybe,” she replied slowly. “Now I have a son, and it’s my responsibility to make sure he comes to no harm.”

“Do you... do you really love him?” George asked.

“Yes,” she said. “It isn’t his fault he was born of rape. He is young but intelligent, and I want to make sure he won’t turn out like Draco, although I’m sure that’s exactly what Draco wants.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me,” George said. “My Lord himself is very much like his own father. But greater,” he added thoughtfully, as if paranoid that Draco was listening in.

“I’m sure Lucio will be powerful, too,” Hermione said. “We decided he should start lessons very young, and in a few years, we’ll have to send him to school somewhere. I’d rather have that than have him constantly under his father’s influence.”

“Did you want to have a child?” George asked quietly.

“I wanted to have a child as much as I wanted to be married to Draco,” she said, and that was answer enough. George nodded and looked away.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It mustn’t be easy knowing I serve him now.”

“It’s a bit of a relief, actually, knowing I’m not the only person he owns,” she said trying to laugh, but it was so true and painful she couldn’t manage it.

“What happened, after you left the Burrow that night?”

Hermione sighed, let her lungs deflate as much as they dared before drawing in breath to speak.

"You know the first half of it," she said, and he nodded. "The obsession, the kidnapping—everything else. The last time I was at the Burrow, Draco sent me a threatening letter. He'd captured Neville and was going to kill him and dismember him if I didn't return immediately. I had no choice, so I went. He released Neville as he'd promised, and then raped me. The next morning, I tried to kill myself. That was the first attempt."

George flinched. With effort, she pressed her hand (still half-numb) on his shoulder for comfort and drew it away before it fell completely numb again.

"I couldn't take it anymore, either. But he caught me and I survived. I was depressed for a long time after that, and still suicidal. He took care of me, more out of selfishly wanting me still alive than of wanting me to get better. He drugged me and spiked my drinks with fertility potions and when I found out I was pregnant, I begged him to end it. I tried to do it myself a few times, but he always caught me."

"I'm sorry."

She looked down.

"He used to beat me black and blue. Once I had Lucio, that stopped. He doesn't make me take Love Potions anymore. But he wants me to rule with him. He promised me my magic back if I agreed." She looked at him. "I've been fighting him for several years now. I'd sworn to myself I'd continue fighting until I died or he killed me... Do you know what it's like to not be able to use your magic for this long?"

He shook his head. He'd been deprived of his wand and magic for only a few months. For Hermione, it had been years. Those few months for him had felt like an eternity.

"I'm afraid I'm forgetting how to use it," she said. "I'm afraid I'll never get it back, that I'll live as I am now for the rest of my life. I'm starved for it, and he knows. He dangles my magic in front of me like a carrot to get me to do what he wants. And I do it. I said yes."

"My Lord granted me a new wand, more powerful than the one I had before," George said. "He fulfills his promises."

Hermione shook her head, wishing he'd understand, that if only he could know how many times he had lied to her.

"Hermione," he said softly, his eyes pained. How natural pain looked in his expression, now. It fit into the lines of his face, the bend to his brow. Her heart ached for him, and the way he was looking at her, she knew he felt the same for her. It only continued to tear her heart in two. "Don't look at me that way."

"You're loyal to him now."

"He helped Fred and I get our freedom," he said. "And in return, I signed my life to his cause. There was nothing else I could have offered him that he wanted. He could have just killed us the moment he took us from Bellatrix, but he didn't."

"Why do you think he wanted you to join him so badly?" Hermione asked, wiping at her eyes. "He's going to use you to manipulate me, too. He's going to test you, again and again,

to make sure you're loyal to him and not me, can't you see that? If I step so much as one toe off his line he'll only have to threaten to kill you to make sure I obey him."

"Do you think I didn't know that?" He asked. "The best we can do is play our parts, and bide our time. If we play his game, no harm will come to either of us."

"That's easy for you to say when you don't have to live with him and share his bed every night."

George went quiet. "It's that bad, is it?"

"From the very first day."

George's voice had gone strange.

"I'm sure my Lord only wants what's best for you."

She stared at him in shock, her heart sinking low.

So that's it, then? He's fully on Draco's side. Maybe he doesn't realize it yet, but he is. I think Bellatrix broke him after all and didn't even realize. The George I knew once would have told me to continue to resist, and to make hell every step along the way. He never would have tried to justify Draco's actions. Never.

"Don't you tell me that rubbish, George, don't you *dare*," she said, and he inclined his head.

"Forgive me, my Lady. I misspoke."

Just how deep was he on Draco's side? There was still so much she didn't know. He'd signed himself over to her husband and clearly worked for him now. What had he done in his service so far?

She looked at him as if he were a stranger.

"Do you believe him, then, when he says he wants to better our world?"

"No," George said. "He only wants enough power to make sure everyone does what he wants, and that there's no repercussion for the things he's done because there's still powerful people out there who won't bow to him and still want him thrown in Azkaban. There used to be more, but he's finding them all and vanishing them... I don't know what he ultimately wants. He seems happy enough where he is now—I don't think he's reaching for anything higher—not yet." George sighed. "But whatever his plans are, whatever he asks of me, I have to obey. I signed my life over to him to save my brother. Now that he's gone, I've got to keep myself alive. Even if I don't really care for life anymore."

Hermione said nothing for a long while, looking out the window bleakly. She had thought George might be an ally to her, a friend reunited, but now she was sure she couldn't trust him, not when he seemed so grateful and—the word made her feel ill—*loyal* to Draco. She would tread carefully, keep prodding for information, but she could not count on him.

Perhaps I can switch him back. But how?

When she turned back to look at him, she thought she saw a flash of odd color in his eye. Her stomach jumped, but he blinked and it was gone, replaced by the usual blue of his eye.

The color shift hadn't been too great—the sunlight was shining onto them from the windows nearby—she could feel it on her own face. It had to have been that, but she still found herself on edge. He looked at her, waiting for her to speak.

“What have we got ourselves into, George? How will this all end?”

“I hope we don't turn into enemies,” he said honestly. “I've done terrible things, during and after the war. I still care about you. You were like family to me, once. You still are.”

“I don't agree with what you did,” she said, “but who am I to condemn you, considering what I've done as well?”

“I don't blame you, either,” he said, voice shaking. “For any of it. For staying. You—we did what we had to in order to survive. Maybe we're monsters now, but we're alive.”

Hermione sniffled loudly, leaning into him, feeling his arms wrap around her. Pain flared up her spine instantly, and she arched her back and hissed, but clung to him regardless.

“I'm so sorry, George...” she sobbed, unable to finish her sentence. Pain jabbed at her, right between her breasts, and she curled away from George instinctively, gritting her teeth.

For what you've been through. For what you've been forced to do. For what he'll make you'll do in the future. I don't think you've realized yet what you've done when you joined Draco.

“Are you alright?” He asked, alarmed, letting her go. The pain fled at once.

“Draco won't let me touch other men without consequence,” she said. “Even if it's innocent.”

His eyes were full of concern.

“You won't get into trouble. Draco owes me this much, at least.”

There was that flash in his eye again, but she missed it as she stood up and checked the clock on the opposite wall.

“Martin is due soon. I need to change. Come and meet him.”

George stayed with her long enough to escort her to the library and meet Martin. They talked awkwardly for a while until George excused himself to go rest.

“You say he is an old friend of yours, my Lady?” Martin asked as he painted, the soft soundtrack of his brushes against his canvas a comfort to Hermione's ear.

“Yes,” she said, struggling to stay awake. It was tiresome to sit still for so long. She had been dozing off for several minutes now. “I was very close friends with his younger brother.”

Saying it for the second time that day felt so odd. Almost liberating, as if it were a secret she'd been on the verge of screaming for years. It wasn't a secret, but the fact that Draco had forbidden her from speaking of them had made it feel so.

“He had five other brothers, you see,” she said, feeling bolder, even as she fought off her drowsiness. The room had grown hot with the midday sun. “Five brothers, and one sister. All together with their parents in one house. I used to visit them in the late summer and stay with them until school started. They were a second family to me. My magical family. My own parents were both Muggles. I haven’t seen them since before Lucio was born. They could be dead for all I know. They don’t even remember me. It’s better off that way.”

“My Lady?” Martin asked. “Are you well?”

“Very,” she replied, her eyes closing. “I’m as fine as can be expected considering the circumstances. I’ve been better before, but I think this is the best I’ll be for quite some time.”

“...Of course, my Lady,” Martin said, sounding unsure. He peered out at her from behind his canvas. “Shall we stop for today?”

“Yes,” came Draco’s voice from the entrance to the library as he strode in. “My wife has had a very long week, you see. Come back early tomorrow and pick up where you left off.”

“Of course, my Lord,” Martin said. He bowed and packed up his things and left. Hermione had snapped awake at the sound of Draco’s voice. She stood up and readjusted her gown. Draco approached her.

“I trust your talk went well,” he said, his hand coming up to graze her temple.

“You saved him,” she said. “Even if it was for your own agenda, thank you.”

His lips were warm against hers. “You’re welcome, little bird.”

He bent down and picked her up, one arm under her knees, the other supporting her back. He kissed her again and set off for their bedroom.

“Where’s Lucio?”

“He had his lunch and was waiting to speak to you. I told him you’d see him tonight, before bed.” He paused. “I know you touched him. I won’t punish you for it. Perhaps it was cruel of me to leave it on you when I knew you would touch him once he told you what he went through. I know you’ve learned your lesson, and I know you won’t be unfaithful again.”

It was a veiled threat and a vague promise. Was he actually sorry, though? Hermione wasn’t sure.

“Of course not,” she said. She reached up and locked her arms around his neck.

Tell him what he wants to hear. Nibble on that carrot, and take a step closer to your magic back.

“He’s a dear friend and nothing more. I’d never be unfaithful to you.”

Not again, anyway, when the only man I really loved is nothing more than bones underground.

As long as neither of them mentioned it, things would be fine.

“I’ve assembled an event of sorts for tomorrow,” he said. “You’re expected to be in attendance.”

Her insides twisted.

“What is it?”

“Something joyous, hopefully,” he said. Hermione didn’t like the tone of his voice when he said that. “I discovered something interesting a few hours ago. I hope you’ll like it.”

A large box floated behind them. Hermione peered at it cautiously.

“What is that?”

His hand slid up to squeeze her bum.

“A present for the most beautiful woman in the world.”

Hermione sighed. What could it be? More jewelry? The box was too large for that.

“You know how I feel about presents, Draco.”

“Indulge me, sweetheart. Is it so bad for me to want to give you gifts?”

To that she said nothing.

You can’t buy my affection. This is only ever for your own pleasure.

They had reached the dining room, where dinner was laid out for them. Lucio was just being escorted in by Pansy. Draco set her down onto her feet and summoned Toffee to take the box up to their bedroom as Lucio ran up to Hermione and jumped into her arms.

“Will you tell me now, mummy?” He asked eagerly, peppering her cheeks with kisses. Hermione laughed, and the tightness in her chest eased.

How can you fear your son turning into a monster when he’s so full of love?

“Tell him what?” Draco asked, and her smile faltered.

“About Hogwarts. About my friends.”

“Potter and Weasley?” Draco asked, the slightest sneer curling his lip. He ruffled Lucio’s curly hair as he sat down at the head of the table, his legs spreading underneath it as if he sat on his throne. ‘So many entertaining stories, aren’t there, sweetheart?’ He asked Hermione. “Go on, share them with us.”

She had not expected this. She eyed Draco carefully, but he didn’t seem hostile. A little on edge, yes, but nowhere near the level she was used to. It was a little frightening, but when he caught her eye and smiled at her it was almost an innocent, honest smile. He nodded, egging her on, and she felt her hackles rise.

“Well,” she began, turning to Lucio’s bright little face. “Harry and Ron were my best friends at school.”

“And Father?” Lucio asked. “What about Father?”

Hermione hesitated. “We didn’t know each—”

“Your mother and I were rivals for many years before we fell in love,” Draco said, interrupting her. “We didn’t get along very well at the start, you know that. She preferred their

company to mine.”

“That’s right,” Hermione said, eyeing Draco warily. What game was he playing now? Or had he too decided it was time to lay out their story for their son? How much would he omit, or fabricate?

I’m about to find out.

“We had a lot of adventures,” Hermione said. “I told you about the troll. We also saved a Hippogriff from—” Draco’s hand gripped her wrist gently. A warning.

“...From being hurt. We got to ride it and fought Dementors in the Forbidden Forest outside our school.”

“Dementors? Wow!” Lucio said. “Master Lleywn says they’re scary!”

“They are,” Hermione said. “Don’t you ever go looking for one.”

She spent the rest of their dinner relaying heavily edited stories of her misadventures at Hogwarts, including Fluffy, the Triwizard Tournament, and the Basilisk of their second year. Lucio seemed to almost not believe it at parts, but Draco had verified it all and neglected to mention his role in every single one as an antagonist on the opposite side. Resentful, Hermione chided herself that she should have known Draco wouldn’t want to paint himself as a villain to his own son.

Not yet, anyway.

“Tell me more, mummy!” Lucio said.

“You haven’t even touched your potatoes yet, my love,” she said.

“Please, mummy?”

“Another day,” Draco said firmly. “It’s nearing your bedtime, anyhow, and we’ve got a busy day tomorrow.”

Oh, right. That.

“Pansy says you’re having a party,” Lucio said. “Can I go, Father?”

“No. It’s only for adults,” Draco said. He stood and went to pick up Lucio from his chair. “When you’re a little older you can come to them all. I’ll expect you to.”

Hermione went stiff.

No.

“When?” Lucio demanded.

“In a few years, perhaps,” Draco said thoughtfully. “I was a little older than you when I was allowed to by my mother and father.”

“That’s a *lot* of time,” Lucio said, scowling.

“A *long* time,” Draco corrected. “It will have passed before you know it, mark my words. Now say goodnight to your mother and I. It’s time for bed.”

“In a few years he’ll still be only a boy,” Hermione said as Draco climbed into bed beside her. “And you want to throw him into your serpent’s nest and witness all you do?”

“I was around that age when my father introduced me to what he did,” Draco said, nonchalant. “It would have been better if he’d known from the start. He’ll learn soon enough what I do and who I am, and you can’t stop that from happening, Hermione. Would you rather have him ignorant of it his entire life?”

“I won’t let you corrupt him,” she said, shaking off his arm when he tried pulling her in closer. “He is *my* son, too, and I have as much say as you do when you try to dictate how to raise him. He *won’t* have the upbringing you had.”

“Shall I just Imperius you to get you to agree?” Draco asked lazily. Her skin broke out in gooseflesh. He wrapped his arm around her hip and forcefully pulled her closer though she tried to resist. Her breathing had quickened.

“Don’t you dare,” she breathed.

“We’ve been over this,” he snapped. “He is my only heir. I’ll not have my own son ignorant of what power his family holds. He will learn just as I did. It’s not corruption. He’ll accept it. I know he will.”

Here came the gooseflesh again.

‘I know he will.’

He sounded so sure of himself as if he’d seen into the future. That frightened her.

“I won’t let you,” she said.

He chuckled. “Fight me then, sweetheart. You know I love it. We’ll see how it ends.”

She glared at the wall, where a wide mahogany wardrobe took up most of the space there. The night table next to the bed—her wand was on it. That wasn’t where she’d left it that morning. Had he magicked it there just now, to remind her of her promise? She closed her eyes, feeling rage simmer inside her, letting it wash over her in waves, giving in to it, imagining herself with magic again, taking vengeance in the cruelest, most pleasurable of ways. That gave her relief, but it was always fleeting.

Draco had fallen asleep, his arm still tight around her. Hermione let herself drift in her rage, feeling her skin burn under his touch, as if flames grew beneath her skin, trying to burst out and lick him to ashes. She thought of her son, innocent and young, dangling over the precipice of his father’s madness. Fear spiked inside her, coiling and twining with her rage.

Mere feet away from her, perched securely on the night table, her wand rolled toward her an inch, then moved no more. She, with her eyes closed all the while, noticed nothing.

A/N:

A long one as an apology for such a long wait between updates. I love you all and thank you for being patient with me and waiting so nicely for updates. I had a real

rough time churning this one out. There's an explicit sex scene earlier in the chapter but since it really doesn't serve much to the overall plot I'm only including it on the Ao3 version of the chapter and on my Wordpress blog. I realize some people have an issue with most of the chapters having a sex scene so I'll be careful about that later on even though I do consider that being an important part of Draco's character and somewhat of the plot. I won't get in depth over it on here but if you want to read that omitted scene please head to my profile and find the links to my Archive of Our Own profile or my Wordpress blog and read it there at your leisure. I realize the sensitive and controversial nature of this story also adds to the complaints so I want to be respectful of that here on this site only, as this is the only place where I've received that particular feedback.

More to come! Happy Holidays!

9. In the Company of Beasts

Dark content in the latter half of the chapter. Warnings apply.

“Wake up,” Draco’s lips brushed against her shoulder. A hand squeezed her shoulder gently. Hermione stirred.

He kissed her shoulder again. “Wake up, sweetling.”

Hermione groaned and rolled over to evade his touch, not wanting to open her eyes. As she turned to face the other side of the room she was assaulted by sunlight, bright and hot and strong, directly in the face. She scrunched up her face, scowling, and sighed. She heard Draco chuckle behind her and felt his weight come off the bed.

“There’s plenty to be done today,” he said, and Hermione opened her eyes to peer over her shoulder at him. “We’ve slept in long enough. Our guests won’t arrive until the evening, but you’ll need to be prepared.”

She frowned at him and slowly sat up as she pushed the sheets away, squinting around the room in the glare of the sun rushing in from the window. Its heat was a comfort on her skin, even as she wondered what exactly Draco had planned for this... *party* of his.

He never held parties. They were always gatherings or meetings that she had not been privy to, before. When there was something to be celebrated, like Lucio’s birth, he had still simply called it a gathering. Perhaps he had only used the word ‘party’ for Lucio’s benefit. This occasion wasn’t likely to be the one to disrupt that pattern.

“The Elves are already working in the kitchen,” he said offhandedly, emerging nude from the bathroom. Hermione instantly went stiff as he walked towards her, not even noticing her subconscious reaction until he went to the window and stood beside it, the light glaring along his pale skin, gleaming in his hair.

Feeling herself relax slowly, Hermione rubbed at her eye and said, “The last time I checked, I believe you only had one House Elf.”

“*We*,” he corrected. “I’ve borrowed a few more in order to prepare for tonight. We’re expecting quite a few guests.”

He leaned against the wall by the window. He didn’t look it, but Hermione could sense his excitement. There was that gleam in his eye as he looked at her. His eyes were like black holes despite their color. He would stare and stare, his face so intent, so wanting. It always made her feel as though he was mentally slicing her open on an imaginary operating table to dissect her weaknesses, her anger. It made her feel terribly vulnerable and uncomfortable. It was easier when he looked at her in lust, there was little to wonder about sexual desire. It was when he looked at her without that heat in his eyes that she was most afraid because she could rarely ever tell what he might be thinking. Gooseflesh broke out over her skin but she

repressed the shudder as he continued to stare. She wanted to pull her sheets back up to cover herself, but didn't, knowing that would only displease him.

He moved closer to the bed and now the sunlight hit him full force, but he didn't seem to be as affected by it as she was. His tall figure cast a shadow over her on the bed. Hermione stared at him, waiting for him to move or leave so she could get out of bed but he only came closer and suddenly she was reminded of that one instance long ago when he had studied her by a window and proclaimed his obsession with her innocence.

He sat down in front of her. The sheets rustled loudly in the silence between them. His eyes were still on hers. Both had hardly blinked.

"You've suffered so much, Hermione. I know it's all because of me. I wish I could feel sorry for it."

She said nothing, waiting for him to continue. His eyes were so clear in the sunlight. So empty.

"Tonight could be the start of something new for us," he continued. "Something great—but I need you to do your part."

"What do I have to do?" She asked, frowning, her insides tightening in a queasy knot.

"Whatever I require of you. But you can begin by closing yourself off to your emotions. It won't be easy, I know," he stroked her cheek. "You know even I struggle with it, sometimes. But you'll find it will make you stronger. And when wielded properly, it can tip the balance in your favor."

"This is a dark indication for how tonight is going to go..." she said.

He smiled. "I'll be there with you the entire time. You have nothing to fear."

She gave him a grave look. "That's what worries me. When you say things like that."

"I hope you understand I only want what's best for you."

Her mouth was dry. She swallowed and wet her lips.

"I won't, because that's not true."

His lips curved just a fraction. "Tonight might prove you wrong."

Suspicion needled at her. "What are you going to do?"

Finally looking away, he took her hand and kissed its back, touching it against his cheek. Hermione waited for him to answer. Instead, he only stood back up.

"You'll see," he said. "Now get ready. I've got your dress picked out for you. We slept in all morning. I believe George has been waiting on us all this time. He must be dreadfully bored."

He disappeared back into the bathroom, where Hermione could hear the shower begin to run.

The mysterious box from the night before was still where Draco had left it the night before. Hermione eyed it, both wanting to open it and ignore it all at once. Likely it was just

another dress. He had given her so many they filled her closet, and though they were to her taste, some (like the infamous green gown) were more revealing than she liked, leaving it clear this was another freedom that had been taken from her. He had bought her some cloaks as well, the finest kinds his gold could buy, all set to match his, but those were strictly for going out (and he hated to hide her curves under silhouette-less robes), and seeing as that was rare, they simply sat in the back of the closet, waiting to be turned out and exchanged for new ones he would inevitably have sent over one day.

She could still remember the first time it had happened. The clothing had been delivered from wherever he had ordered them (definitely not Madame Malkin's, this was the finest cloth she'd ever seen) and he'd brought them to her, had her try them on for him, even though he'd had them all made to her measurements and knew that they would fit her perfectly. She had refused and refused and in the end he had Imperiused her and took her up into the bedroom and made her strip and try on all the outfits one by one, including the lingerie sets she had not noticed amidst the mass of parcels and boxes. She had smiled for him, she had thanked him and sat in his lap, she had let him take the last set off her body once done, and he had ravished her afterward. But when he lifted the curse, she had pushed him off and screamed. And screamed.

The sound of Draco setting bottles down in the shower snapped her back to the present. Hermione set her jaw and went to the vanity to look in the mirror and decide whether her hair needed washing. She sniffed at it and decided it did, just as there was a knock at the door.

"It's Pansy, my Lady."

"Come in."

Pansy entered.

"Good afternoon, my Lady."

"He is in the shower," Hermione said. Pansy went to her quickly and they kissed each other's cheek.

"Lucio was very put out to be alone today for breakfast," Pansy said.

"I didn't realize we'd slept in. He woke me up just now. Was Lucio angry?"

"More curious, but George joined us and he asked him lots of questions about Hogwarts."

Hermione smiled. "Yes, he had so many questions yesterday. We'll never hear the end of them." She glanced at the bathroom door. "I've thought about taking him to the ruins, but I don't think Draco will allow it."

"Definitely not," Pansy said. "He said the wards around it fell when Hogwarts fell. He put his own around it. It's protected. We all expect they will begin work on the ruins within a month or two."

"What could he even want with it?" Hermione asked.

"He won't say anything about it. I only heard about this through Crabbe last time he was here."

They heard the shower turn off.

“Will you want me to style your hair?” Pansy asked, switching back to stewardess mode as Draco came out of the bathroom, a towel around his hips.

He saw Pansy and nodded. She bowed.

“Good afternoon, my Lord.”

“Good afternoon. Is my son awake?”

“He’s with his tutors now, my Lord.”

“Good. I want him in the nursery a half hour before guests begin to arrive. Entertain him, and then I expect you to join us once he’s asleep. If he doesn’t fall asleep by his bedtime, use a sleeping charm.”

“Yes, my Lord.” She bowed.

“You know how many people we’re expecting,” he said. “I want you to go into the kitchens and make sure there’s enough of everything for the dinner. Take stock of everything coming in and out, and ask Toffee to bring up a light lunch for my wife and I.”

“Yes, my Lord. Is that all?”

“I’ll need your help later, with my hair,” Hermione said, giving her a quick, meaningful look. Draco had gone to the dresser, running his hand through his wet hair distractedly. He ran a hand through it again, and it was completely dry.

Pansy caught on and bowed to her.

“Of course, my Lady.”

She left, headed for the kitchens.

“Are you going to shower?” Draco asked.

“No, I want a bath,” Hermione said.

“If you’d told me, I’d have joined you,” he said, smirking at her through the mirror.

“I prefer my baths in solitude,” Hermione replied, and Draco chuckled again. He took off his towel, hung it by the dresser, and snapped his fingers. With only that snap, he was immaculately dressed in his favorite black suit, his cloak over it, clasped at his shoulders with golden serpents.

“I’ll notify Toffee to warm up the bath.” He Apparated away before Hermione could protest that she could do it on her own.

He was back no less than ten seconds later, as if having suspected that she might actually try and dare to do it herself when she had a perfectly good House Elf that was more than willing to do it for her. Hermione fought the urge to roll her eyes.

Draco had sat down before the fireplace on one of the armchairs there, reading a newspaper. Hermione went to him.

“What’s in the news?” She asked carefully. He might not let her read the papers but if she asked, he’d tell her bits and pieces if he felt generous. Nothing ever too important.

“Someone attempted to break into the Ministry’s Department of Records and Licenses,” he said. “Interesting.”

“What were they trying to steal?”

“Read it yourself,” he said, and Hermione felt a thrill in her stomach as he shifted the paper for her to read.

Still, she hesitated, expecting him to grin and snatch it away before she could even glean one word from the paper. Was this a trick?

But he didn’t move, and his expression bade her come forward.

That she did eagerly, trading discomfort for knowledge. Hermione scanned the whole spread first, looking for something, anything important, almost disbelieving that he was actually *showing* her the paper when for so long, he had denied her that simple pleasure.

Before she could finish, he pulled it back, took it all in one hand with a finger stuck between the pages, and patted his thigh.

Hermione felt only a slight sense of annoyance as she sat in his lap, her ravenous curiosity winning over her dignity. Once she was comfortably settled he opened up the paper again and watched as her eyes greedily scanned the lot of it, brows already furrowed.

Whoever had tried to break into the Department had fled before the Aurors could apprehend them. Nothing had been stolen, but security at the Ministry was being increased, as this was the third time in the past two months that there had been a break-in.

“Reconstruction to begin at site of Hogwarts ruins,” she read. “An ambitious plan hinted at for years is finally taking off this summer, thanks to the generous funding provided by Lord Draco Malfoy, who intends to rebuild the once-renown institution into a new, prestigious school of magic for only the most skilled students.”

She frowned and looked at him. “Why make it exclusive?”

“I only want the best. Is that ludicrous to you?”

“Why not take more students across all levels and *help* them become the best?”

“*Hogwarts* was the charity school. Mine won’t be. It will succeed where Hogwarts failed.”

“Where did it fail?”

He grinned. “Had they been more competent at teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts, or even dueling,” rather than wasting our time with Care of Magical Creatures or even Herbology, you might have stood a better chance at defending yourself against me.”

Anger flared through her.

“Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures are *just* as important as the other subjects. And you know you cheated. You did awful things to me and I was too embarrassed to tell anyone what was happening. I was naive and you took advantage of that.”

“Yes, I did.” He looked proud of himself. She seethed. “How could I resist your naivety? You were such a sharp, innocent little thing. But you let your pride and your shame silence

you when you should have said something, and that gave me all the power I needed to make my claim.”

“I kick myself every day over it,” she muttered. “I came so close to telling McGonagall.”

“But you didn’t,” he said. “And later on, I wouldn’t let you. Do you remember that, love? I wasn’t about to let you spoil it all. Not after I’d worked so hard on you.”

Her eyes were pained. “I remember every second of it all.”

He brushed a thumb over her bottom lip.

“That’s all behind us now. We can start anew.”

“That’s a very optimistic thing to say.”

“I’m not expecting it to be immediate,” he said. “But you’re taking the right steps. We might even get there sooner than you think.”

“What does that mean?”

He gestured back to the paper, to the picture of Hogwarts before it had been destroyed.

“It’ll take a year or so to complete.” He squeezed her waist gently. “Will you want Lucio to go there, when he is of age?”

“It won’t be Hogwarts anymore,” she said.

‘only for the best students...’ does this mean it’ll only be for the sons and daughters of his followers?

Was Draco planning to use this as a means to control their son out of Hermione’s reach? Her instincts screamed ‘yes’.

“No,” he agreed. “It’ll be better.”

She turned back to face the paper, unsure. What would his reaction be if she said no?

“It’s close enough to us,” he said, “you won’t have to worry about him being so far away. No one will dare hurt him, regardless, but I’ll make sure this school will be enough to develop his ability and intellect.”

What were the other options? Send him to America? Russia?

Wherever he ends up going, Draco will find a way to get involved.

That was a certainty.

We still have several years before he’ll be of age to go. But I have to get this done as fast as I can, for both our sakes.

When she didn’t respond, he smiled.

“You’ll have time to decide.”

She nodded, her eyes going back to scan the other headlines.

Draco hadn't lied about not being idle. His name was mentioned in several other short columns: an orphanage had been on the brink of shutting down until they'd received a huge donation from Lord Malfoy, he had made an appearance at the round-table meeting where the current Minister had received powerful leaders of other countries in order to discuss possible expansion of the wizarding territories across the globe.

"Keeping a positive public image will do wonders for getting others to trust you," he said. She could sense his smug smile. "Accusations of me kidnapping you still run rampant, but they're whispered now, rather than shouted. I've got... *friends* everywhere that help set the record straight. Now that you've stopped fighting me, I'll expect you to make more public appearances with me out of disguise. Smile, and give them a little show to shut their mouths. No need to look like my captive anymore, is there?"

She had expected him to bring that up. She nodded again, biting the inside of her cheek.

He let her finish reading the paper. She insisted on reading every bit of it, though the rest revealed nothing of much import, except she discovered a new Quidditch shop had been opened at the former location of Fred and George's shop.

"Don't feel sorry for him," Draco said. "He got a lot of coin for it. It would have been torture for him to run it without his brother."

An advert for a popular new book took up a corner of the page— "The Last Battle: A historical analysis of the rise and fall of Voldemort and Harry Potter."

Her heart wrenched. She closed the paper. So it had been long enough that books were being written about them now? It had only been a couple of years. The thought dizzied her. The question was, who would the author paint as the villain? She didn't suppose Draco, having as much control as he claimed, would look kindly on a book that would put Harry up as the hero.

I might have to read it and see...

She folded the paper and put it aside, twisting in Draco's lap so she could cup his face in her hands.

"Thank you, my Lord," she said earnestly.

"You earned it," he said, stroking her arm. "Now, it's time for you to get into the bath. The water's gone cold. I'll warm it up for you."

When she finished and came out of the bathroom with her robe securely around her, he was waiting by the bed, holding the box.

"I can't wait to see you in this," he said softly, his voice rough with anticipation. He bid her forward and opened the box and pulled out what was in it. Hermione watched nervously.

A long, heavy draperie of garnet and amber, with darker gemstones encrusted all along the bodice and the skirts. As he moved toward her the gems caught the light and glowed yellow, red, gold, in the light.

“Fire for fire,” he said, kneeling at her feet and presenting it to her. “For my queen.”

Hermione paused and feeling his heat, found herself wondering if it came from the dress, too. Absurd thought, but not as absurd as when she reached out and touched it, half-expecting it to burn her. She only felt the cool, faceted surfaces of the many stones. It was the most stunning garment she’d ever seen.

“Put it on,” Draco said, watching her, and the light from the gems reflected in his eyes. They were curiously golden—a strange departure from his usual inscrutable silver. “Right here. I want to watch you do it.”

Feeling oddly compelled by his words and the strange cast of the stones, Hermione reached for the tie of her robe and began to undo it, but she wasn’t going fast enough and he had grown impatient. He moved her hands away and undid the tight knot easily, pulling the robe off her shoulders sharply so that she gasped. It pooled around her ankles in one heavy heap and she was left nude, her skin pebbling in the cold air.

Already Draco had carried the dress over and was behind her, helping her step into it, guiding it up and over her hips, which he cupped between his palms like delicate globes made of glass. The stones tapped and scraped against the floor as it dragged. The dress was cold and hard against her bare skin, from the inside, despite the silk inner lining, it scratched her now and then when the fabric rippled and she felt the cuts well up underneath the stiff sheath of black fire. The gown slid up her breasts and encased them lovingly, she tried not to move since it felt uncomfortable and she wanted to spare herself getting cut there by the gown’s bizarre design.

Draco zipped the gown up her back and fastened the tiny button at the nape of her neck. There was a long open slit that started at the base of her throat and ended inches below her breasts. Hermione looked down at herself, glowing, shimmering.

Draco was wrong. The dress was both fire and ice. It started at her throat in glowing red embers that encircled her throat in a choker. Whoever had made it had done an incredible job—the stones looked like they were part of the dress and not sewn on. It gave it an organic appearance like she had peeled the crust from a volcano and weaved that and its lava into cloth. The stones were arranged in a tight, intricate pattern and wound down to larger ones, gleaming cruelly as they burned. It was stiff—at the bodice was a mixture of umber and obsidian with garnets and dragon opals placed strategically so as she breathed and her breasts and stomach moved it gave the appearance of molten lava peeking out from underneath rock. The skirt flared a little way down past her hips and here the stones were smaller to keep it light so that when she took a step it was like a wave of liquid fire rippling; a pet flame at her feet, waiting to be commanded. Two slits at the tops of her hips ran down the length of her legs. As she moved her legs a tantalizing side-view of her ass was exposed beneath the fabric.

The ice was on the inside of it, scraping against her skin in the same way her husband’s teeth did. Every movement, no matter how miniscule, made the stones press into her flesh from inside the liner. She wondered that there wasn’t a thicker protective sheath underneath the stone details but suspected that Draco had it that way on purpose on some sadistic whim. Her nipples had stiffened both from the pain and the cold weight of the dress; she shivered and wished she could take it off.

“Beautiful,” Draco said softly, circling her. The weight of his stare was added onto that of the dress.

She felt as though the weight of the dress forged her body with every movement. Hermione turned slowly to face Draco, and again his eyes were alight with some strange emotion. The dress forced her to keep a straight posture and she felt rigid and yet molten as she looked at him.

His lips parted. In one swift move, he knelt again at her feet, and she allowed him to take her hands and press reverent kisses to them.

“How do you feel, little phoenix?”

Breathing was a new experience under the weight of the dress. When she spoke her voice came out like it was the last breath left in her lungs; heavy and deep.

“Cold.”

He rose then and pressed his mouth on hers. His hand was on her back digging in, and the pressure made the stones dig into her flesh painfully—she cried out into his mouth, already feeling the warmth of her own blood on her cold skin. She arched away from his hand.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure it won’t leave marks,” he said softly and lightened his touch. He brought his hands up to hold her face gently between his palms.

“My little fire-bird.”

He gave her another kiss. Terrified that he might press himself against her and have the dress cut into her again, she held her palms lightly against his chest—not in protest of the kiss but in fear of harm. She was tense, thinking that he might take it as defiance but he understood her anxiety and kept to the kiss only, his hands pushing back into her hair.

“Why would you make me wear this?” She could feel blood trickling down her back. The wound smarted. “What were you thinking?”

“I want everyone to see you in this,” he said, placing a hand on her waist gently. Hermione froze in place, hardly daring to breathe.

Her eyebrows raised.

“You want them to see me butchered alive by this... *thing*?”

He laughed. “It won’t go that far, sweetling, I promise.”

She set her jaw. “I want to wear something else.”

“No,” he said firmly. “I had that specially made for you. You’ll wear it tonight and whenever else I want you to, and that’s final.”

Hermione glared at him.

“Then promise me you won’t lay a hand on me for the rest of the night.”

He laughed again.

"I can protect you from the dress with a simple charm," he said. "I just want you to remember to behave."

"I can and will without the dress. Don't make me wear this."

He stepped closer. Their breaths mingled. He leaned forward and licked her bottom lip.

"*You'll wear it.* I want them to see how I tamed fire for my own. How you rival the sun. My little flame..." his other hand made a ring around her neck. His thumb pressed into the hollow of her throat. "Show them how you burn for me."

I'm so cold, she thought, shivering. The hand at her hip wanted to squeeze—she could tell by the rigid way he held his arm, as if barely holding himself back. She was tense, her body on the verge of ripping herself away.

Thankfully, he kept still.

But oh, how he wanted to close that hand over the hard gems and the sweet, soft flesh; crush lovingly and bruise it, bleed it, mark it. His little bird stood quivering under his touch, her ruby-golden breast fluttering with her tensed breaths.

How enchanting you are, wife. How utterly darling.

He pulled his hand from her hip and she relaxed visibly.

"They will fear you," he said softly to her, brushing the hairs away from her temple. "Just as they fear me. They want you. They hate you, envy you. They pity you—they know I am as cruel to you as I am them. But they love it, and so they think you are lucky. But no one will ever worship or love you as I do."

"No, they can't," she agreed. "No one else could descend to such madness."

He grinned as if she'd given him a compliment.

"No one will ever think you are weak," he continued, gently gathering a fistful of her thick, long hair.

"And you never have been. Bird you may be, but none other would have survived to this point. Even flightless as you are, Hermione, you are stronger than any person I have ever known, and that is why you are mine, and that is why they all respect you."

"I don't want them to love me."

Or fear me, or envy me, or pity me. I don't want to see or know them.

As if he knew the rest of that thought, his lips curved. "Regardless of how you treat them, they will come to love you. It cannot be helped, my love, but there is an advantage to be had if you choose to take it."

"What advantage?"

"If I asked any man that serves me to drown his firstborn son he would do it," Draco said, and Hermione's breath hitched in her throat. "You already have a band of admirers, men and women alike. There will be more. We've been waiting for you to join us, my love. They are so eager to know you. What would you do with them?"

Hermione frowned. “Nothing. I don’t get what you mean.”

“Besides the obvious,” he said loftily. “Anyone of them would give away their entire fortunes to a House Elf for a mere chance at sleeping with you. And I don’t mean one little lay. I mean fucking, the way I’ve had you since the night we were wed. They could tell you secrets that would turn your lovely hair white. They could acquire items for you that you never even dreamed existed... And if you so wanted, but you never will, they could gladly smuggle you out of your own home and take you from me.”

She hardly dared breathe.

“Of course, I would know about it,” he added, and his hand holding her hair pulled down gently so that she was forced to tilt her head back. “And if any of them ever presumed to act on their fantasies I would cut them open, just enough to keep them alive, and feed them their own heart, piece by piece, so that they know only I may sate my lust for you.”

His voice was full of conviction—the sliver of doubt she’d felt at those words vanished at once.

“There’s a great deal to be learned and gained by using others,” he said. “Win them over, and they’ll be your loyal servants if you choose. You could even help me get what I want from them, and earn your magic back more quickly.”

Gears were working in her head.

“Think on it,” he said.

“Yes, my Lord.”

“My lord,” came another voice, and Hermione jumped violently. The movement made the dress cut into the skin on her breast, and she gave a hiss of pain. Draco had not moved. He stared down at her chest, his tongue coming out to lick his lips. The hair along her arms stood on end.

“What is it, Pansy?” he asked, his voice rough. Slowly, he let go of Hermione’s hair so she could stand and turn, but not before giving her a scorching look that rooted her to where she stood.

“They are all here, my Lord. They eagerly await your presence.”

“We will join them presently,” he said and ran a hand through his hair. He licked his lips again. “Go.”

“Yes, my Lord.” Pansy bowed to them and left.

Draco returned to Hermione instantly, and she was startled to find his mouth on hers so suddenly, taking no care to be gentle. She struggled to breathe and held her body away from his but it was only her lips he wanted; he tortured them with his own until he broke away and she was gasping for breath, flushed and her lips reddened and swollen from his bite.

He studied her proudly. His hand raised to her breast and healed it. His other hand had healed the wound on her back.

“None of them will be able to resist you,” he said, and she frowned.

She came across Pansy in the corridor after Draco had left. He had given her no shoes so the marble floor was a shock against her feet with every step. It was an odd sort of labor to walk with the dress on. It flowed around her in the strangest way, and its weight seemed to anchor her in place—she was sure she would be sore in the morning. The mere thought of climbing stairs exhausted her.

“My lady—” Pansy approached her swiftly and gave a slight bow. A sign Draco was nearby. “You look beautiful.”

A word Hermione was so, so tired of hearing.

“Thank you,” she said. “Where is my son?”

“My lord is with him now,” Pansy said. “The guests have arrived, and he wants to see the party. You wanted help with your hair?”

“Yes.”

They went into the nearest room with a mirror—the Isolation room. Pansy had Hermione sit at the vanity and began to arrange Hermione’s hair in a pretty bun above her head.

“We don’t have much time,” Pansy said, a hairpin between her teeth. She pulled another out of thin air. “My Lord will have gone downstairs waiting for you.”

Hermione could hear distant voices coming from below. Music rolled in, too, which unsettled her.

We both know it isn’t a party, and we both know it won’t be suitable for a child.

“Draco would enjoy having him there with us,” she said, anger flashing at the recall of their earlier discussion. “I want my son to take no part in any of this.”

“Of course,” Pansy said. “It’s easier to prevent it since he’s so young. Draco told me once his parents used to fight over this all the time when he was Lucio’s age. His father won in the end, though.” She met Hermione’s eye through the mirror, worried.

“You know there’s nothing I can do if he tells Lucio otherwise.”

Hermione closed her eyes.

“I know.”

When they were done, Pansy returned to the nursery to make sure Lucio was in bed. Hermione met Draco in the foyer. She had wanted to bid Lucio goodnight, but remembering the painful design of her costume, had reeled back from the nursery door at the mental image of Lucio hugging her and coming away with his cheek and his little hands cut up and bloody. Or suppose one of his little fingers got caught between a clutch of gems and got torn off? No, no, no. The dress was too indecent for him to see her like this, anyhow. Draco had her wear revealing things all the time, so it wasn’t like this was the first time it had ever happened, but this dress was a step above *those* and another claim of ownership on her. She felt the choker like a collar around her neck and wanted to rip it off. She would hate for Lucio to see it, even if he didn’t know what it meant.

Draco's arm wound around her, his hand clutching her hip. She winced. He tipped his head down and kissed her gently on the lips.

"My Lady," he said reverently. "Are you ready?"

"No."

"You are a queen," he hissed. "Nobody in there is above you. Nobody but me. Remember that. I have a plan for tonight, sweetheart. A gift for you."

"I don't *want* g—"

He kissed her to silence her. His finger tapped on her ring—*obey me*—and she shuddered.

"Have fun tonight," he said when he pulled away. "I mean that. Make me proud."

He held out his arm for her to take. Carefully, she did.

"Is this a punishment?" She asked, looking straight ahead, at the doors leading into their seldom-used ballroom, where muffled voices and music leaked through. It sounded merry but to her, felt funereal.

"Exactly the opposite," he said, leading her to forward the doors. "This is an opportunity."

The tall doors opened slowly, and the full blast of the music and the voices hit her. Her first thought was that it would wake Lucio, and then remembered she had heard Draco remind Pansy to put a Silencing ward around Lucio's nursery so he wouldn't be disturbed by whatever happened tonight.

Beads of sweat slid down her back.

Death Eaters greeted them on all sides, masked and cloaked, spread out across the room. The music died at once. A hush fell over the room. She felt their hungry eyes taking in their Lord, and she felt precisely when their gazes landed on her.

His face impassive and blank, walking proud as a king, Draco said nothing and led her to the end of the room slowly to where his throne waited. They all bowed as Draco and Hermione passed them. It always chilled Hermione to see it.

The crowd parted down the middle as they advanced, not a word nor whisper falling to break the silence except footsteps and the scrape of the gem-studded train of her gown trailing the floor.

Hermione stared straight ahead, willing her face into a mask as best as she could to fight the anxiety that boiled inside her at the mystery of what was to come. The throne was directly in front of them. They were not too far away, but the walk to it may as well have stretched for miles with as long as she felt it took for them to reach it.

It was a plain, classic throne. Raised up on a platform that was set deep into the wall and shrouded by shadows. The throne was trimmed with gold and the cushioning covered with black velvet. He'd had another made for Hermione, but she had always refused to sit in it. That one was not there today, and she was grateful.

The first few times she had refused to sit in her throne he had punished her severely, knowing the statement she was making each time. Whenever the next event came around, he

worked around it by having her sit in his lap, and she supposed it would be the same this time around. Annoying as it was, she preferred it.

If I ever sit in that damned throne I'll lose myself, she thought.

Not because of lust for power. But Draco would see that as a huge victory. He would claim another piece of her, and then seek out the next. And she had already said yes to him, she knew that—but sitting in that chair meant giving up what was left of her former self. And she knew he knew it. Sitting on his lap—although still humiliating—was better than sitting in her own throne, as if she had accepted them all.

Perhaps that was what he meant by having a gift in store for her. She knew that soon, if not tonight, he would have her in a throne. Be it by force or by her own will. She loathed the thought.

You made an agreement. Face the terms like a Gryffindor.

They reached the throne, went up to the ten steps that led up to it, and turned around to face the others. Hermione's heart pounded.

In front of them was a sea of black. All she saw were bent backs, bent knees.

Draco sat, his hands tugging on her hips to guide her down onto his thighs. In a blind panic, she resisted his pull, fearing the immense pain that would meet her there thanks to the dress, but his hands pulled her down regardless, an amused smile flashed on his lips. She'd bit her tongue and braced for pain but felt nothing. He must have finally cast the charm to shield her from the stones. She hadn't even noticed. She could feel his erection through her dress and hoped its hard surface was uncomfortable for him, but knew he had probably cast the charm on himself, as well.

He settled himself comfortably into the throne, adjusting Hermione so that her legs were draped over one leg. The long slits in the skirt exposed her legs up to her thighs. He smoothed a hand over that warm skin. Hermione nervously pulled at the skirt and arranged it between her thighs. She saw his brow furrow slightly, but he said nothing.

"Rise," he called, "and uncloak. Resume the music and begin."

At once his followers obeyed, and Hermione didn't know where to look as their gilded robes fell away and vanished to reveal fancy dress and familiar faces. Where there had been a sea of black, now color flashed wherever the eye landed. The opulence of it all always annoyed her. The music began again, not light and festive anymore but more of a mysterious, mournful sound. Still, people swayed in time to it and bodies flocked to the food tables, talking amongst themselves as they did so.

Someone approached the throne.

"My Lord," a deep voice said. "My Lady."

They bowed, and Hermione recognized Theodore Nott as he straightened in front of them.

"What is it?" Draco asked. He slouched a little in his throne, the leg that wasn't supporting Hermione stretched out in front of him.

"I've received word from the scouts," Nott said. "Squadron 5. They've noticed unusual activity around Knockturn Alley."

"The usual thefts and rapes?" Draco asked, bored.

"No, my Lord," Nott said. "That's the thing. They've stopped. There hasn't been crime in a fortnight. What's more, they've found the bodies of three known repeat offenders."

Draco's hand was on her waist, stroking idly.

"That is unusual," Draco remarked. "Any evidence as to who did it?"

"We're almost positive it's Longbottom, my Lord," Nott said. "Same modus operandi. Strangulation and castration for the rapist. The thieves lost a hand, each."

Hermione went still. Draco gave a warning squeeze of her waist.

"I wonder what he's trying to tell us," Draco said, and Nott laughed. "Tighten and continue surveillance around the area. I want you to narrow down any patterns he might be making in terms of seeking prey, and focus on those areas. I know he's got Potter's Invisibility cloak but he's bound to slip up sometime. Keep your men on the ready."

"Yes, my Lord. My Lady," Nott said, dismissing himself with another bow. Hermione caught his eyes flash down to her breasts and his smile as he walked away.

"He wants you," Draco muttered, his other hand stroking her spine. "Badly, I might add. I can almost smell the desperation off him. He hasn't had a woman in months."

"I don't want to hear this," she said coolly. "Why cut off the hand of the thieves if he could just take them to the Ministry?"

"I knew you were disappointed to hear it," Draco said. "Nott isn't the only one who's desperate. Longbottom's been poking around, trying to get intel on me for years now. He's gathering whatever measly forces he can to work against me, but their failures are greater than any victory they've won. He takes out his frustration by acting as a sort of vigilante when his ego's taken enough of a thrashing. It's pathetic. He only gets what I want him to get, and he's never going to get you back."

A roar of vicious glee washed over Hermione as she clutched onto her secret.

"Why haven't you killed him, then, if he's so pathetic?" She asked, turning her neutral mask into resentful expression.

"I get bored," he admitted with a lazy smile. "I have many sources of entertainment to keep me busy, and he's one of them. He's the little mouse that runs through my mazes, but there isn't any cheese at the end."

She frowned. "What are the others?"

His smile grew bigger. "I have my hunting trips, of course."

"I thought you'd stopped."

"If I did it all the time, sweetheart, it would lose its fun. I space them out to savor them."

Someone else had approached them, bowing. He was huge, perhaps as tall as Draco, and fitted in an old cloak that might double as an ugly curtain. A thick, ragged scar had been carved up one cheek. His balding had advanced quite thoroughly since the last time Hermione had seen him, but despite that, his form was still strong and formidable. Hermione remembered the heavy ax he'd carried the day he had come to Hogwarts to execute Buckbeak.

"Rise, MacNair," Draco said.

"My Lord," MacNair said, standing straight. "My Lady. There was a mishap with the prisoner. Crabbe gave her too much sleep potion and she won't wake."

"Who allowed Crabbe to administer the potion?" Draco asked sharply.

"I don't know, my lord."

"I'll wake her." Draco waved a hand in dismissal and MacNair bowed again and left.

"What prisoner?" Hermione asked, suddenly cold.

His hand rubbed at her back. "Don't dwell on it, sweetheart. That's for later."

She sighed, annoyed. Draco's hand tightened on her hip. Having forgotten the charm she tensed and almost cried out, anticipating pain, but exhaled sharply when nothing happened.

"No need to worry," he murmured. "It will only hurt you when I want it to. I can't have you fainting from blood loss before the main event, after all."

The heat in his eyes suggested it was something he wouldn't mind much. Her hand went up to the scar of his bite on her neck.

"I always suspected you were aroused by blood," she said.

He grinned.

"I can't help that I like to bleed something pure."

He shifted her on his lap so that her legs were wider apart and the slits in her dress revealed more than she wanted it to. She immediately tried to fix it, but her hands stopped moving after an inch.

"No," he said, cold again. "Don't be shy."

She was wearing nothing underneath, at his command. His hand on her spine stroked slowly. The other hand at her hip had smoothed itself over her lower abdomen, almost cupping her.

"I know you're frightened," he said, his voice ringing through her though he spoke softly, only for her to hear. "You think something bad is going to happen. It all depends on how you look at it, little bird. You can continue to be a victim, or you can start to take something back."

Stressed, Hermione fought not to pull away, to close her legs.

His lips brushed against her shoulder. Slowly and reluctantly, she let herself relax into him, leaning against his front, making sure to appear calm though she felt anything but. His

followers were watching them, some discrete, some less so, as they mingled about below. She spotted Pansy below briefly, speaking to another witch she didn't recognize by the door.

"You know I would do anything for you," he said, kissing her neck. "I've proved it, and I'll prove it again."

"Prove it now, then, and give me my magic," she murmured.

"That's for later," he chuckled, his breath warming her skin. "If you continue to hold your end of the deal. Now, drink."

A house-elf had appeared beside the throne and bowing, presented a tray with two goblets. They levitated—one into Draco's awaiting hand. The other waited patiently at Hermione's side. She hesitated.

"You know I don't drink," she said.

She thought he didn't, either, but in the past few years, she had seen him indulge now and then, most notably during the celebration after Lucio's birth.

"Oblige me, sweetheart. Tonight is a special occasion."

She eyed him warily. "For what?"

"Of you joining us, of course."

"What's in it?" She asked suspiciously. She could smell the sour tang of red wine, rich and bold, but fought back a shudder. He had drugged her before like this, and she had ended up pregnant because of it.

He took her hand and enclosed her fist around the goblet. The elf bowed again and left.

"Only wine." He shifted her off his lap gently and guided her to stand before the throne. Hermione realized with a sudden drop of her stomach that the congregation had gone silent and was now facing them both, their own goblets raised.

So many faces. Many of them were smiling.

Unsure, she looked at Draco. He was holding his goblet out to her.

"To Lord Malfoy!" Someone called, and the others repeated it in tandem, their voices filling the halls.

"To Lady Malfoy," Draco announced, smiling proudly. "Who is one of us at last."

There was a brief pause as his words sank in, and then came the gleeful cry:

"To Lady Malfoy!"

Hermione would debate for years afterward if she had lifted her arm of her own volition, or if Draco had moved it through magic, but her arm lifted and interlocked with his bent arm.

The smell of the wine was overpowering. She did not want to drink it.

"My wife, my Lady," he said, his eyes heavy with lust and pride. "Now, and always."

She got the sense she was supposed to say the same, but couldn't bring herself to. His eyes were expectant.

Play your role. Convince him. Get your magic back. Kill him.

She swallowed. This felt like a death sentence, but she couldn't get out of it now. If she refused or ran, all her work would go to waste.

Please him now. Kill him later.

"My... husband. My Lord. Now, and always."

The toast was complete, and there was a cheer all around them. They lifted their goblets and drank.

The wine was too dark—she tried not to make a face as it went down. It was oddly hot rather than cold, as she'd supposed. She shuddered lightly and Draco pulled her in close to kiss her deeply, their tongues moving together.

Play your part.

"Go talk to them," he said, pulling away. He waved a hand and their goblets were gone. "They want to dote on you."

He wrapped his arm around her waist and walked her down the steps to the throne to the revelry, where there was already a group waiting for them. Draco kissed her hand and left her to them.

"My Lady, it is an honor to finally have you with us," one of them said, a blonde woman with brown eyes. "Truly an honor."

Hermione nodded, smiling, wanting nothing more than to walk out of the room.

Win them over.

There were more faces she didn't know at all, here. Draco's numbers must have been growing of late. The thought scared her.

"You look so beautiful, milady," Daphne Greengrass said as she curtsied.

"We're so pleased you're finally with us!" Exclaimed another woman, touching her arm.

"Thank you," Hermione replied, awkwardness rising within, threatening to choke her.

"What made you decide to join us at last, my Lady?" An unfamiliar man asked

Desperation.

She ignored that thought and thought of a proper response. One that might please Draco should it get back to him.

"My love for my husband," she said, making sure to smile though her teeth ached with the blasphemous lie. "I realized I'd been foolish and proud. He has helped me see things more clearly."

The closest around her who had heard her nodded. Bile pushed up her throat.

“How is the little lord?” One of them asked.

The air was hot, cloying with the proximity of the bodies wanting to talk to her.

“He is well,” she replied, and nodding and smiling at the others who were vying for her attention, moved away from them until she had reached one of the tables laden with food and reached out to pour herself some water.

“My Lady,” came Pansy’s voice from her side and she whirled to find her friend there.

“Thank goodness,” Hermione said, closing her eyes briefly. “This is all too much.”

Pansy wore an elegant black gown, her cloak draped over her shoulders. She approached Hermione and they hugged.

“You’re really going all in on this?” Pansy whispered.

“What other choice do I have?” Hermione whispered back.

They pulled apart.

“This is all so absurd,” Hermione said softly, looking around. “I keep wondering whether it’s real.”

“I feel that too, sometimes,” Pansy said. “But those thoughts can lead to darker paths. Best not to linger on them.”

Hermione nodded absently. “I’m glad you’re here,” she said, touching Pansy’s arm. “I don’t know if I could have gotten through this alone.”

Pansy smiled. “I am always here for you, my Lady.” Her eyes flicked over to Hermione’s right.

“Someone is approaching. I think they want to speak to you.”

Hermione sighed. “This is how I’ll go mad. Having to hear, ‘we’re glad you joined us at last!’ Over and over.”

“Say no more, my Lady.”

Pansy rushed off to intercept the newcomer and expertly diverted them into a conversation as she led them in a different direction. Hermione watched gratefully.

“This is merrier than I thought it would be,” came George’s voice from beside her. She looked up, and he bowed, presented her with a new goblet, smelling of the wine. He had shaved and washed, dressed smartly for the occasion, but the wear and damage in his face still tugged at her heart.

Her head was already spinning. She hadn’t eaten much that day and the wine was too strong. She shook her head.

“I just want water.”

“As my Lady wishes.” He tapped the goblet twice—once to clear it, again to fill with water. He handed it back to her.

“Thank you.”

She drank from it deeply.

"Draco says there's to be a surprise tonight," she said carefully. "Any idea what that is?"

"I'm bound not to tell you," he said, shaking his head. "I'm sorry."

She had expected as much and nodded.

Couples were dancing around them. Hermione wasn't sure what to do. She could feel others eyeing her, waiting for their chance to speak to her, but George's presence seemed to keep them at bay. She would have to ask him about that some other time.

"What does it feel like, being nobility?" He asked, his mouth curving upwards.

"Like I'm wearing a name tag that isn't mine," she said. "Draco just likes how it sounds. I wasn't born into it. It's all false. It doesn't mean anything."

"To them, it does," he replied quietly. "Our power's risen faster than even Draco thought it would. He's got his hands everywhere, controls so many things, he'd be better off as Minister, but it isn't surprising he likes the pomp and flair of Lord better than Minister."

"What's he working on currently?"

"He doesn't trust me enough to share that with me," George said. "I hear it in bits and pieces from the others."

"Would you do me the honor of dancing with me, my Lady?"

Startled, Hermione looked to find Nott to her left. It seemed George couldn't ward off everyone, unfortunately.

She opened her mouth to decline when Draco's familiar hand on her arm stopped her.

"I'm sure she'd be delighted," he said, smiling, leaning in to kiss her cheek.

Annoyance pricked at her skin.

"Flirt with him," he breathed into her ear. "Make him eat out of your hand."

Confusion gripped her, but she kept her face a mask as Theodore led her out on the floor among the other couples, smiling smugly, and put his hand on her waist.

He withdrew his hand back quickly, hissing in pain at the cut on his palm.

"That's a reminder to behave," Draco said from a few feet away, his voice cold even though he was grinning. "I know you, Nott, and I won't have you pawing at my wife."

Nott had already healed his hand, and inclined his head towards Draco, though he was frowning.

"I wouldn't dream of it, my Lord."

"Liar," Draco called back, still grinning. "I know what you dream of."

Nott said nothing to that and led her farther away, his face flushed.

"Interesting dress," he said, as they began to dance. His grip was careful and light, but there were no more cuts, and she suspected that Draco had disabled (for lack of a better word)

its hazardous texture.

Was Draco playing with her, telling her to flirt with Nott? Or was it an actual mission? What was there to gain from this? She had never liked Nott and usually ignored him as much as possible whenever he was at the Manor, or in general proximity. She hadn't expected to dance with anyone except perhaps Draco, if he was in a dancing mood. Why had he pulled her into this?

But still, she had an objective, and if she pleased Draco tonight, perhaps she'd get her magic back sooner than she thought.

"It's not very comfortable to wear," she admitted, pulling a face and shifting suggestively. "Draco had me try it on for him this afternoon."

"Lucky bastard." Nott's eyes aimed downwards and lingered there. "He's always had good taste. Women, especially. You look ravishing, my Lady, as always."

Hermione tipped her head to the side, giving him a pointed look.

"I remember a time years ago when you wanted nothing to do with me and made fun of me, alongside Draco."

He inclined his head. "Forgive me, my Lady. I was young and stupid. If I'd matured faster and not been so stupid I would have snagged you before Draco."

She wanted to roll her eyes.

Ah yes, I forgot I'm an object to be claimed, not a real person with agency.

Her angry retort lay in wait on her tongue, ready to be fired, but she willed it away and merely smiled.

"You couldn't offer me anything that Draco hasn't given me," she said coyly. "My husband is very attentive."

Nott nodded grudgingly. His gaze slipped down to her chest again.

"I'm sure he is. What I'd give to switch places."

She gripped his hand a little tighter and his eyes met hers again. She gave him a playful, warning glance, as if she weren't bothered by his leering even though underneath that facade she wanted to pull on a jumper.

"What would you do, if you could?"

Nott's eyes were full of surprise at her question—she caught his eyes dart over her shoulder, as if he were fearful of finding Draco nearby.

"Don't be afraid," she said, her voice low. She gave him a daring smirk, the best she could muster over her nerves. "He can't hear us."

He *probably* couldn't. She didn't know where he was—but she could feel his stare. She was sure his hearing wasn't superhuman, but he had ways of spying on her and she was well aware of it. Whether he approved or not of her method she couldn't know, but he had given

her no restrictions aside from the ones set by her ring, and she was determined to follow his order.

Even if it makes me ill.

He stepped closer as they moved, as close as he could without incurring scandal or Draco's wrath. She felt the heat coming from him and saw the intensity in his eyes—the same sort of lust that always clouded Draco's eyes.

"I would worship every inch of you," Nott said, his voice hoarse and low. "Over and over. I would give you the world, my Lady."

At this, Hermione couldn't help the laugh that sputtered out of her mouth.

"What's so funny about that?" He asked angrily. "You wanted to know."

She arched a brow.

"You're very optimistic, to promise me the world when my husband beat you to it, and I believe his promises above all others."

Nott's jaw tightened. "Of course he has. Well, I'm not a monster like him. I wouldn't hurt you the way he does."

She looked at him coolly. "Watch your tongue."

Nott nodded. "I forget myself in the presence of your beauty. Forgive me, my Lady."

"You're forgiven, but I might have to have you punished next time."

"I'll take any punishment gladly, especially if it's under your hand," he said, grinning. The song had ended, and he bowed again. Light applause filled the room. He did not release her, and they continued to dance slowly. A new song began.

"My husband doesn't hurt me," she said, lying through her teeth, "unless I want it to. And I do, often."

He swore under his breath, looked away abruptly, and cleared his throat.

"He's that good, is he?" His voice was flat.

"He knows exactly how to leave me without want," she said. That at least was merely half a lie.

She made herself look him up and down. "You, on the other hand, are lacking."

Nott's eyes gleamed.

"I would be the happiest of men if you told me each and every fault of mine so that I might improve in your eyes."

If only Draco were so eager to improve on his own faults. You might learn from your own subjugate, husband.

"I'll give you only one for now: Jealousy isn't attractive."

I deal with enough jealousy from Draco. I don't need you adding onto it, and I never liked either of you.

"It's a beast to overcome, but I'll do it gladly for you, my Lady," he said and bowed.

She extended her hand. He took it and bent over it, pressed his lips to its back, maintaining eye contact.

"I am always at your service, my Lady Hermione," he said. "For *anything* you may need, you need only ask."

"I expect someday I will," she said.

He grinned.

"I look forward to it immensely."

He left, merged back into the crowd. Someone else stepped in front of her.

"Will you do me the honor of dancing with me, my Lady?"

George.

She smiled. "Of course."

His arm went around her and he took her hand. They joined the motion of the others dancing.

"I didn't think you were keen on Nott," he muttered.

"I'm not unless Draco tells me to be."

He nodded. "I suspected that was what was going on. I'm sure I don't have to remind you to be careful."

"Believe me, if he hadn't ordered me to flirt with Nott, I wouldn't even have danced with him."

"I wonder what he wants from Nott," George muttered. "He's wealthy, but Draco doesn't need money."

He trailed off, lost in thought.

Desperate to change the subject, she gave him an inquiring look.

"How are you?"

He gave her another smile—a hollow one. All the joy had been wrung from his face long ago.

"Not in the mood for an event like this, but I obey when my Lord requests my presence."

She nodded, too familiar with the sentiment.

"How do *you* feel?" He asked, and she wondered if her reply would be relayed to her husband later.

"Better than I did before entering this room, but I'm expecting the worst."

“You’ve done well so far,” George said. “Just remember to keep your mask on. Don’t let them see underneath it.”

She nodded, suddenly nervous again. Draco’s advice to her this morning, and now George’s words replayed in her head.

‘Close yourself off to your emotions.’

‘Keep your mask on.’

Those words filled her with foreboding and dread, but she would try. If what Draco had said about wanting the best for her was true, she would try.

Because he probably knows whatever’s going to happen that warrants those words will destroy me.

George suddenly stood straighter and let her go. He bowed.

“My Lord.”

Draco had returned. He nodded to George, who relaxed and left, and held his hand out to Hermione.

“Dance with me.”

He pulled her amidst the dancers, his hand flat on the small of her back, pressing her into him.

“It won’t take much more work. Nott would swallow his own tongue if you tell him to.”

“I don’t see why,” she said uncomfortably.

“You’re beautiful,” he said bluntly. ‘You’re clever and sharp and you look good on my arm. He’s always wanted whatever I had. He thinks we’re rivals. If I ever saw him as one I’d have killed him a long time ago. Plus,’ he added with a saucy smile, “power attracts.”

“What are you trying to get from him?” She asked.

“He’s got a lovely little piece of land in Russia I need. A valuable estate. Passed down from generation to generation. Quite the family history. He’s rather reluctant on letting go of it. I could just order him to give it to me, of course, but I like to give them the illusion of choice. Resentment creates weak links. You’ll flatter and woo him, and I’ll give him the position he’s been thirsting after like some starved dog, and he’ll sign the papers faster than a Snitch flies.”

“But what do you want the land for?” She asked.

“To tear it all down,” he said. “And build our next home.”

“In Russia?” She asked, her brows rising.

“It’ll be exciting, don’t you think?” He asked, leaning forward to kiss the edge of her mouth. “I’d dearly love to hear you speak Russian. I’ll roll you up in thick furs and make love to you in the snow.”

His tongue pressed flat against her throat, licking a hot stripe down its length.

Hermione was too busy processing the news.

We're going to Russia next.

He claimed the Resistance was too weak to be a true threat to him, but they had found their previous estates, hadn't they? Even if Draco had led them there. Perhaps they didn't need his clues anymore.

Say they've already begun to close in on us?

They would move to the new place. Then what? Wait there for another few years before moving again. Why even bother moving? If Draco was so powerful, why didn't he ever bother to stay and fight, or capture them all? Was he really that bored?

She would have to tell Neville as soon as she could.

She felt his breath turn her flesh from cool to hot. His teeth grazed her earlobe.

Play your role.

She let her head fall back, made herself let out a soft, relaxed breath. His hand reached into her plunging neckline, cupped her breast, skin to skin. His other hand was on her ass, squeezing hard. His charm did its work admirably. Were anyone else to touch her at that moment, they would have met the cold and hard surface of her dress.

Some of the dancing couples around them had caught on and paused to stare. Despite herself, Hermione found herself blushing. Draco tweaked her nipple gently.

"Let them see," he said as if knowing her distress. Her hands were on his chest, clutching his lapels.

"My Lord, please..." her cheeks were red. She could feel many pairs of eyes on them. The room felt as if it had narrowed in on them. Her breath shortened. The music seemed to slow to a crawl.

Releasing her breast, he grabbed her by the arms and yanked her closer, their fronts colliding. She grunted. His eyes were challenging, alive and dancing with some demented glee.

"Did you lie to me when you made me those promises, sweetheart?" He breathed, stroking her hair lovingly. Her stomach dropped. She felt a bright, sharp flash of pain at her bottom where he was groping her still. She sucked in a breath, letting it hiss out between her teeth, not wanting the others to see her pain.

"No, my Lord. I meant it. I just don't like it when others watch."

He smiled without warmth, and the pain disappeared. "Then show me. Prove it to me now."

He pulled her in and kissed her gently, which was the opposite of what she'd expected. Hermione endured it, not even daring to let her fear and anger linger inside her. She let them pass through her like a current, afraid that somehow through the kiss he would be able to sense it, and know her deception, what little of it she had managed to build so far.

“As for the other thing-I’ll help you get accustomed to it,” he whispered, and her skin crawled.

When they pulled away from each other, he raised his hand and motioned with it. The music stopped. The others, who had been still dancing around them, dutifully ignoring the chastisement of their Lady, chatting softly in the background. Hermione heard the doors open, and the sounds of people coming in. She tensed. Draco wouldn’t look away from her, that cold calculating stare boring into her.

She started to turn around, dread and curiosity warring within her. Draco’s hands on her arms prevented her from managing it.

He inclined his head.

‘Prove it.’

‘Close yourself off to your emotions.’

The hairs on her arms raised.

He squeezed her arm gently, a mockery of comfort.

“Make me proud.”

He released her, stepped beside her to face the party that approached them. Somehow, in the midst of their dancing, they had ended up square in the center of the ballroom. Had he planned that? His followers had split in half, forming walls around them, caging them in.

Crabbe and Macnair walked towards them. A body floated behind them, unidentifiable thanks to the ragged cloak that had been thrown over it. Hermione fought not to step backward.

Who is that? Immediately her mind spun into action, rifling through pictures of faces not seen in some time, trying to recall who was still alive, who Draco might have captured and dragged out here to torture her as part of his sick game.

She felt her heart stutter in its beating—could it be Neville?

The two Death Eaters bowed and went off to the side. Draco took care of the body, lowering it to the floor with magic. He flicked a hand to the side. The cloak flew off like a great gust of wind had moved it.

Hermione stared. Sick, sluggish relief crawled through her.

She didn’t recognize the girl at all.

She was young, younger than Hermione perhaps by a few years. She had long brown hair—unkempt and dirty. She was asleep, not dead, as Hermione had feared. She was short and slim, unhealthily so, barely covered by clothing that wasn’t hers—or perhaps it had been once and she had lost enough weight to make it hang off her. Bruises circled her wrists like manacles. Hermione frowned and went pale when she noticed the matching bruises on her breasts. She had no doubt she would find similar bruising along her lower body, which was mercifully covered by trousers that looked like they had been dragged through mud, as if this stranger had been captured out in the wilderness.

“Who is this?” She heard herself ask.

“Her name is Danielle, or so I’m told,” Draco said, as if it didn’t matter at all. “She was in Hogwarts at the same time as us, although a few years lower down. Perhaps you remember her.”

He was looking down at the girl impassively.

“Do you?”

“No, my Lord.”

“Then this should be easy for you.” He nodded at MacNair, who stepped forward to Hermione, a long and narrow pouch in his hand.

Was it a new wand? Her heartbeat a little faster, but before she could entertain the dim hope of escape for another second MacNair had withdrawn the dagger that lay within. He presented it to her with a low bow.

She stared down at it.

“Take it, sweetheart,” she heard Draco say from outside herself. “I had it made for you.”

She stared. Her hand, oddly still, reached out and took it. It was heavy and cold—she faintly sensed a malevolent energy inside it that made her want to let it go immediately. The hairs along her arms stood up again. She forced herself to hold it more tightly—if she dropped it now, Draco would punish her.

MacNair bowed again and stepped back beside Crabbe.

“She belongs to the rebel group led by Longbottom,” Draco was saying. “We caught her sneaking around the Hogwarts ruins. We’ve been interrogating her for weeks, but she hasn’t revealed anything that we don’t already know. She is of no use to us.”

He flickered a finger, and the girl awoke, stirring on the cold floor and sitting up slowly. She could not stand—whether it was from injury or Draco’s magic, Hermione wasn’t sure.

Her eyes took them all in. Fear registered at once. As she gazed at Hermione and Draco, recognition flashed across her face, particularly when she saw Hermione. Her head whipped around and she saw the others standing around them and realizing her situation, struggled to push herself away. Her hands had been bound behind her back. As the prisoner moved, Hermione caught a glimpse of a vivid red bite mark on her thigh.

Her stomach twisted. Her own scar of Draco’s bite stung in sympathy. She felt her hate sharpen.

Beasts.

The girl opened her mouth and spoke, but no sound came forth. She had been silenced.

“There’s no need for you to speak anymore,” Draco said. “We’ve gotten everything we need from you.”

Crabbe smiled smugly. Hermione caught the prisoner take notice of him—she cringed away, her legs coming together tightly, her body curling into itself.

That was a language Hermione was unfortunately familiar with. Her own body had spoken it so many times. The girl refused to look in Crabbe's direction again.

"You were working for Longbottom," Draco said to the prisoner, and she looked at him, hate etched in the lines around her mouth, premature for someone so young. She raised her head high. "You will die knowing you served him well, although I suppose that's hardly any consolation considering the fact that he didn't consider you trustworthy enough to tell you anything of true importance. And why would he? You disobeyed orders to prove yourself, to show your worthiness. Look where that led you. What do you think, will he regret not trusting you?"

Laughter rang out around them.

Hurt flashed in the girl's eyes. Hermione's hands itched to free her, take her hand, and run.

"We gave you a bargain—tell us where Longbottom is hiding, and we would spare your life. We would find some use for you. Crabbe has expressed an interest in keeping you. None of these options appealed to you, especially the latter. I don't blame you."

More laughter. Crabbe shrugged.

The girl had lowered her head into her shoulder, her brows contorted as she cried. Frozen, Hermione could only watch. The dagger was held loose in her hand. She gripped it tightly, her heart pounding.

Draco began to circle the girl—Danielle. He lifted the *Silencio*. The girl's quiet sobbing struck at Hermione's heart. She looked so small.

"You have one last chance," he said. "Reveal the location or you die here."

"I don't know," the girl said brokenly. "I don't, I swear..."

She turned to Hermione, her eyes pleading.

"I remember you," she said. Her voice was hoarse. "I remember—everyone talked about you. They wondered where you'd gone. You were Harry Potter's friend. We all thought you were dead for so long."

Draco snarled.

"She was my willing wife all the while," he said. "Isn't that right, sweetheart?"

'Prove it.'

Her heart ached. She nodded.

"I was." She had to force herself not to whisper it. "I am."

The girl seemed to notice Hermione's apparel for the first time. She frowned and her eyes hardened.

"They were right about you. Traitor."

Quick as a viper, Draco held out his hand. He aimed his hand at her head and the captive cried out, her eyes going blank as he invaded her mind, ripping through memory to try to find what he wanted.

The screams were as bad as if he'd used a Cruciatus. He had only ever used this once on Hermione, and it had not hurt then. She still felt the sense of violation it had given her, to feel his presence in her memories and thoughts as he flipped through the pages of her memory as easily as she had turned the pages of books throughout her life.

When had he figured out how to make it hurt? She had been in fear of that power ever since the first time he had used it on her and counted herself lucky that he had never used it again, and never allowed herself to wonder *why* he hadn't, irrationally believing it might jinx her luck.

Hermione found herself stepping forward, nothing but blank hate coursing inside her. Just as quickly, she was frozen in place before she'd even taken a second step. Draco didn't even look at her.

He pulled out of the girl's mind with an angry roar. She slumped to the ground, limp, and Hermione struggled against the charm holding her in place, wanting to rush to check her pulse, to shelter her. Her eyes were glued on the girl. Her insult had been laden with the weight of betrayal but curiously, Hermione had felt none of it.

Draco was breathing heavily. He pushed his hair from his face.

"More worthless than I thought," he said, and with his hand, directed his magic to turn her over onto her back.

Someone in the crowd to Draco's right spat on the girl. White-hot anger seared through Hermione. Draco caught the flash of her eyes towards the offender.

"Who spat?" His voice cracked out like a whip. "Step forward. You've displeased my wife."

There was a second's worth of silence before they stepped forward—a man with a sallow, angry face and greying hair. He had gone white. He knelt at Draco's feet.

"I did it, my Lord."

"Did I ask any of you to spit on our guest?" Draco asked, his voice sharp.

"No, my Lord," came the replies, echoing around the room.

"You acted without order," he said. "And you angered my wife."

"Forgive me please, my Lord, I acted stupidly." The unnamed follower crawled forward as if intending to kiss Draco's shoe.

Draco stepped back, sneering. "I'm not the one to beg to, fool. Your punishment shall be decided by my wife."

The follower paused, and went back up on his knees, peering up at Hermione.

"Break his wand," she said, her voice calmer than she felt. Something had shifted inside her.

The man spluttered.

"My Lady, *sweet lady*, you cannot—"

Draco had freed her from the freezing charm. She raised her chin high.

“I cannot?”

She was tired of Draco telling her what she couldn’t do. She would not tolerate others doing it, too.

The follower ducked his head immediately, his hands on the floor. “I misspoke my Lady, forgive me.”

“You take many liberties for someone who pledged servitude to my husband and I,” she said coolly. She glanced at the prisoner to see if she had woken yet. She was stirring. The spittle had landed on her nose. No one cared to clean it up.

She looked back to the follower.

“What is your name?” Her voice was gentler.

“Reed, my Lady. Luther Reed.”

She could not use magic. Draco had not offered to help her. She would improvise.

“Luther Reed,” she said, “Take your wand and break it.”

Visibly upset, Luther Reed obeyed. Hermione felt a heady rush of satisfaction course through her at the sound of the loud *SNAP* it made.

“You are not allowed to buy a replacement,” Hermione said. “And if somebody takes pity on you and gives you a wand, I want you to break that one too so it is only connected by the thread of whatever hair is inside, and you’ll use that wand until it breaks completely, and then repeat the process.”

The man wanted to glare at her. She could see it in the twitching of his brow. He was barely holding it back. She almost wanted him to curse at her, to defy her and stand, to try to strike her, so she could add on to the punishment. Her anger begged for an outlet.

Instead, to her disappointment, he bowed again.

“Thank you, my Lady. I will not fail you again.”

He stood back up and went back to his place in the watching crowd.

Hermione looked back at the girl, and realized she had already woken, and seen the whole thing. The spittle on her nose was gone, had been vanished away while she was out. Her eyes were bloodshot and a little distant, but she stared at Hermione as if she were the one who had captured and bound her. Blood trickled from her nose.

“Excellently done, my love,” Draco said, approaching her. He took her and kissed her deeply. She felt his erection through his trousers.

Before he stepped away, he took her hand and closed its grip more firmly around the dagger in her hand. He squeezed hard. Their eyes locked—the blood had drained from her face.

“You knew this was coming,” he breathed.

She nodded, as if in a trance. She had guessed it the moment they had brought out the girl. In fear, in denial, she had not acknowledged the fully formed thought, hoping she might be wrong.

“Do it.”

The knife was cold in her hand. It boasted an intricate silver-handled hilt embedded with fat rubies like the ones on her gown.

“I had it made for you.” So he had. Such attention to detail. She stared at it as if outside of her own body, then looked down at the captive.

The girl—Danielle’s face shifted into an expression of terror. Hermione stood there, petrified.

“Wait,” the girl said, trying to scoot away from Hermione although she had not moved, “wait! I know where he might be!”

Draco paused. *“Might is not definite. I want solid answers, not guesses.”*

He held his hand out to Hermione. She took it. Her hands were shaking. He squeezed it, led her to the captive, who tried to rise to her feet, but couldn’t manage it. She sobbed loudly, shaking her head.

“Please don’t!”

How many times had Hermione been the one to say those words? She felt very distant from herself, like she was watching herself through a glass. She moved numbly.

Two voices clamored within her.

Don’t do this. Don’t do this.

She wanted to vomit.

I want my magic back. I want my freedom.

Draco had given her the knife on purpose. This would have been easier with magic. She didn’t know if she had the strength to do this without magic.

You’ll kill to get it back?

I’ve come this far. I’m so close. If Draco were to kill her, he’d make her suffer longer. She’s been through enough.

“I might know where he is!” The prisoner repeated, near hysteric. Hermione reached out and grabbed her arm, hard enough to still her movements briefly. The girl paused, blinked away tears and looked at her pleadingly.

“You’re better than this,” she said. “I remember you. You were good.”

Hermione’s hand tightened around the dagger.

Not anymore.

Draco scoffed. “Where *might* Longbottom be, if you’re to be believed?”

The girl blinked up at him. Hermione waited on bated breath.

If she knows about the hidden cemetery and tells him, we're done for. If she doesn't know, we're done for. Nobody wins but him.

"His grandmother is still alive," she said. "He visits her a lot. She moved to Godric's Hollow. I know her home is warded."

Draco stared at her. The girl cried out—her head falling back, her eyes blank and awful as Draco searched her memory again, collecting what information he might have missed before. She was stiff as a board—Hermione found she couldn't let go of her arm.

When he pulled out, the girl slumped backward. Hermione helped her sit forward.

"It's a shame Longbottom couldn't return your affection," Draco said, a tilt to the corner of his lip. "Had you managed to make him look away from Lovegood, he might have revealed more to you, and I might not have wasted so much time on your half-answers."

Whether the girl could hear him, Hermione wasn't sure. Her eyes stared blankly upwards. She seemed much weaker than before.

"Nott, Thurgood, Argyle."

The three followers stepped forward.

"Find where the grandmother lives. Get me at least two people who have a close connection to the family. I want to know how heavily warded that house is, who comes and goes."

They nodded and left the room at once.

Draco seemed pensive as he looked down at his captives.

"Still, you yielded more answer than I thought you would..." he turned to Crabbe.

"Would you still have her in this state? I'm afraid she won't be much of a talker after today."

Crabbe bowed eagerly. "I would still have her, my Lord. I don't want her so I can talk to her."

A low ripple of laughter rose from the crowd around them. Somebody whistled. Hermione grit her teeth.

The girl blinked. Her eyes had become more aware. Her eyes met Hermione's. Was it hope Hermione saw there or another plea? She couldn't tell.

"What do you think, my love?" Draco was asking her. "I'll let you decide. Will you kill her, or gift her to Crabbe?"

Hermione wouldn't look at him. If she did, she knew she wouldn't be able to control the hate in her eyes. He would know she was playing him. It was too late to be found out, too late to change her mind. Maybe he knew her plan and was testing her, pushing her to the point of no return, waiting to see if she would break.

None of us win. Not even you, husband. I'll make sure this comes at great loss to you.

Tears had formed in her eyes. She fought them back fiercely. They would not see her cry tonight. Her hair had slipped from its arrangement and fell around her face, shielding her from the eyes that watched.

Danielle was still staring at her. The blood had dried around her nose and a vein had burst in her left eye. It was half-closed—her eyes were still somewhat distant. She looked so frail, so tired. How much had she been through? How much more could she withstand?

Danielle blinked. Her eyes were clearer now, and Hermione felt that she had sensed her conflict. Could she see Hermione had not betrayed them willingly? Even if she had allowed Crabbe to keep her, that was little better than a death sentence, and Hermione knew that from experience. She too would be stripped of her magic, used and beaten until Crabbe grew bored of her. If he grew bored of her.

Danielle shook her head.

Draco had told her there were others. Hermione had never met any of them, as he wouldn't allow them to be brought into the manor. Well, she would ensure there would never be one again.

Even if it breaks me.

She raised her dagger.

Danielle closed her eyes, tears running down her cheeks.

The hilt of the dagger had grown warm inside Hermione's clammy grip, and it went warmer still, almost *pulsing* as Hermione drove it with all her strength into the captive's chest, straight into her heart, and the blood gushed forth.

The girl gave a huge, pained gasp that wracked her whole body. Hermione cupped her cheek, her tears dangerously close to slipping down her face. Her lips were clamped together to fight the sobs that wanted to be let out.

I'm sorry.

Danielle continued to gasp, her body floundering and fighting for breath. Her eyes were wide and pained and frightened but the blood continued its heavy flow, soaking into her clothes so rapidly that within seconds she was saturated. Her breathing was labored, haunting as her lungs filled with blood and began to collapse, as her heart itself began to fail. Seconds seemed to stretch into years. Hermione refused to let go of her, even when Danielle had gone limp in her arms and her head had fallen back, her eyes lifeless.

"It is done," Draco said from behind her. "MacNair, dispose of the body."

"Yes, my Lord."

Hermione felt the body drag from her hold and she released it reluctantly, watching as MacNair walked out of the room, Danielle's still-warm corpse being dragged behind him by some unseen force. A trail of blood smeared the floor behind them.

"You'll have another chance for a plaything," she heard Draco say to Crabbe. "You may not like a talker, but the silence can get tiresome."

“Thanks, my Lord,” Crabbe mumbled.

Hermione was still kneeling on the floor, clutching the dagger so hard her hand was losing feeling. The blood on her hands went up to her elbows. Some of it had splattered onto her dress. She felt hollow. Cold. Too weak to stand.

They were all still watching her.

Play your part.

She looked up, scanned the crowd for George, and he was there closest to her, his face pale but void of emotion.

He began to lean forward, offering his hand to help her up, but she shook her head and rose on her own, half afraid her legs would give out underneath her. The sudden rising motion had her blood rushing too fast—she felt faint and if it weren’t for Draco grabbing her to kiss her, she would have collapsed in front of everyone. She let herself go weak against him, her arms winding around his neck, letting him ravage her lips.

Some unspoken command had been made. All around them she heard quick steps, the shuffle of fabrics, the movement of many bodies to the door. Nothing more was spoken—all she could hear was Draco’s breaths in her ear, the dull pounding of her heart, the slither of his tongue against her skin.

When the room was empty, he bent down and hooked his arm under her legs, lifted her off her feet. He apparated them to the bedroom and vanished the blood from her hands, magicked the dress off her body. She lay there, limp and distant as he held her hands above her head and pushed into her roughly, rocking the bed with his thrusts, moaning into her ear.

“You did so well, sweetheart,” he panted, grinning. He affixed her hands to the headboard and occupied a hand in playing with her clit. He leaned forward and kissed her breast, pushed harder inside her, groaning.

“I’m so proud of you.”

She said nothing, enduring it silently until he ejaculated inside her at last with a long groan and rolled off her.

“How do you feel?” He asked.

She turned and finally looked at him, and said nothing.

He stroked her temple.

“The first time I killed someone, it affected me, too,” he confessed. “Perhaps not as much as this did to you, but I still felt something. Not regret. Not sorrow. But after the second, and the third and the fourth, I didn’t feel anything at all. It might take you longer. It might not. But you’ll get used to it. I know you will.”

That night, Hermione dreamed of both the murders she’d ever committed. When she pushed the dagger in, first she would see Blaise’s face, then it would shift and turn to Danielle. She would cry and stab again and again, in the face, the chest, the stomach, and in the end, when nothing but a ruined body remained, her dagger had become dull and she was

covered in blood, the body somehow repaired itself and looked good as new, and Draco's face would be there instead, and he would wink at her.

When she awoke, covered in sweat and cold as if she'd slept in a mound of snow, she was gasping for air. The light turned on and Pansy was there on the bed in an instant, cradling her in her arms as Hermione clung to her, her eyes raw and haunted, shaking, but no tears came forth. Draco was nowhere to be seen.

A/N:

Obligatory sorry for the wait. I think now you'll understand part of why this chapter took so long. This is the longest chapter I've EVER written and so it took a lot of time and effort to both write and edit. 34 pages! Hopefully the next one won't take as long. I'm truly sorry about the wait and hope this more than makes up for it.

Please leave a review, (check out my blog or my Ko-Fi, etc) and let me know what you think!

XO—

C

10. A Leak

Helloooooo everyone. I warned you all of slow updates, but even I wasn't expecting it to be this long! ;-; I've been busy, sadly, and have barely written for months. Thank you all for waiting so patiently and leaving reviews. If you read What We Know of War, expect an update for that as well before the month's end.

When she finally awoke she was alone. Her head pounded with a vicious headache, and her mouth was so dry she sat up, her throat burning with thirst. She noticed the glass of water waiting at her bedside and took it, walked straight to the bathroom and poured it down the drain. She refilled it and drank deeply, so quick that water slopped down her throat.

The night before came back in flashes—she swallowed abruptly and set the glass down.

She remembered waking up, suffocating on her nightmare. Pansy had been there and had stayed with her for an hour, soothing her. Draco had been nowhere to be seen—she'd been too preoccupied to notice or care, but now it struck her as odd. She wondered if Pansy knew why. Eventually, she had asked Pansy for a Dreamless Sleeping draught, and Pansy had obliged readily.

The door opened and she turned to see Draco stepping in. He approached her rapidly, taking her face in his hands, his eyes scanning her face.

“How are you feeling?”

She didn't reply. He nodded, as if he'd expected that answer.

“I told Lucio you're ill. He sends you these.”

He made a motion with his hand and a lovely little bouquet of flowers from their garden appeared, still as fresh as the morning dew. Hermione took them, her heart aching with love.

Draco kissed her.

“You did extremely well last night, sweetling. Extremely well.”

Her voice was dull but soft. “Thank you, my Lord.”

He stroked her cheek with a finger gently. “Is there anything you'd like to do today?”

“I want to rest.” Her voice was hoarse—had she screamed in her nightmare? Or after taking the Sleeping Draught? She couldn't remember but her throat hurt and her entire body ached quite badly. She felt heavy with the events of the night before. And hollow. So hollow.

“Then rest,” he said, and picked her up easily into his arms, brought her to the bed and sat down with her still in his hold.

“I know it was a lot to ask of you in one day. But I knew you would do it.” He squeezed her shoulder. “I couldn't be prouder of you.”

Indignation flared within her but she maintained a neutral expression because anything else was too much effort. She barely moved in his hold. He stroked her arm, staring at her avidly.

“What do you feel?” He asked.

She stared at the wall, shivering in the cold air.

“Nothing.”

That was actually true. The pain and torment of the night before were curiously gone. She wondered distantly if her depression was returning to full strength. Had it ever really left? At least, since Lucio had been born, she had felt more like herself again. But that had come on so gradually, and the horror of her reality hadn’t changed one bit except for the fact that now she was more firmly tied to her unwanted husband.

Draco squeezed her arm gently—she wasn’t sure if that was the answer he wanted or not, but he said nothing.

“There will be more, sweetheart,” he said eventually, breaking her tired silence. “Remember that. Don’t waste your energy on what’s dead. Your emotions will only hinder you. Pay them no attention. But your anger, your fury—there’s power in that. Keep those in your pocket for the right time.”

He had said as much, before.

‘Learn the right time to start your fires, little bird.’

He kissed her temple. “I’ve got to go to the Ministry at five. Come with me.”

She shook her head, unable to stomach the thought of him having Pansy prep and dress her for an outing, for the smiles she’d have to force, for the attention and the eyes that would follow them wherever they went. She anticipated an angered reaction, or a reminder of their deal and reached out, put her arm around his neck, buried her head in his chest.

“I’ll do it next time,” she said. She felt his pause, the surprise in his stiffness, but that was gone immediately and he melted into her touch.

“You will,” he said, but his voice was gentle.

She swallowed, afraid of what she wanted to say next.

His hand stroked her back.

“Stay with me,” she whispered for the first time in their marriage, in their entire *acquaintance*, and meant it. If he left her, she was afraid of having another nightmare. Of having to get out of bed and see her son and feel the invisible blood that coated her hands thickly as she held him and pretend nothing was wrong. Of looking George in the eye at the dinner table, and knowing they now shared a terrible secret, and that it was very likely the first of many. Of feeling so hollow that she would rot out from the inside until there was no meat to hold her body together, and her flesh would dry and wither, and she would slide apart.

Draco responded at once, summoning two pillows to arrange underneath them. She rolled onto her side, curling up into a ball, and he hooked his arm around her waist and pressed her

to him, his blood thrumming in his veins.

Finally.

His other arm snaked between her pillow and hooked around her throat—not to choke, or to suffocate—he held it around her there loosely to support her head with his arm and she preferred that, needing to feel pressure on and around her. If he had even decided to lie on top of her she would have let him, feeling that she might just fade away. If he could hold her as tightly as he was now, if she could feel his heat bleeding into her body, she must be real, and she would take it. Anything, anyhow, to hold her together.

The face of the dead young woman wouldn't leave her mind. Hermione shut her eyes tightly, until all she saw was white. But the face returned—and when she saw the captive in her mind again, she bore not Danielle's face but her own, and it was Hermione's own voice that she heard as the captive's screams echoed in her mind.

She flinched so sharply she awoke, not even realizing she had fallen asleep again, not knowing how much time had passed—Draco was still there—she breathed heavily into his chest—his hand was on the back of her head, his arm wrapped around her waist, cradling her into him.

She was damp with sweat, close to hyperventilating.

"Shh," Draco was whispering, stroking her. "I'm here. Let it fade, little bird. You'll feel nothing eventually."

He kissed her forehead, rubbing her back slowly and murmuring to her until her breathing calmed down.

She awoke hours later, a different set of arms wrapped tightly around her. Hermione shifted, blinking slowly, her heart already beating faster.

"Don't be afraid, my Lady," came Pansy's voice from behind her. Hermione immediately noticed the difference in her slender, smooth arms to Draco's massive, muscle-hardened arms. She relaxed. Pansy squeezed her gently.

"My Lord had to go to the Ministry," Pansy said. "He ordered me to look after you until he returns."

Hermione nodded.

"Lucio?" She whispered. Her voice was hoarse. "Is he up yet? Where is he?"

"He is asleep, my Lady," Pansy said. Her voice was smooth and sad. "My Lord sent him to bed early before he left. Lucio wanted to see you but I wasn't sure—"

"Not like this," Hermione said quickly.

Pansy quieted, and they lay there in silence for a while.

"I'm sorry I couldn't tell you," Pansy said eventually.

Hermione turned around in Pansy's hold to face her. Pansy let her go.

“You knew?”

“I was aware there was a prisoner—I thought at most he would have made you watch as he tortured her. I didn’t know he had planned something different.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Hermione said. “You were following orders. There was nothing you could have done.”

“George wasn’t up for breakfast,” Pansy continued. “So it was just Lucio and I. George went with my Lord to the Ministry.”

“Do you know why they went?”

Pansy shook her head. “No. I’m sorry. Draco only told me to expect him back around ten.”

Hermione glanced at the clock on the other side of the room. It was almost ten.

“Where was he when I woke up from my nightmare?” Hermione asked.

Pansy stared her straight in the eye, her own suddenly wet.

“I’m sorry.”

So she did know. As much as Pansy’s words made her want to shiver, she figured it was better than lying to her, but now she was full of questions and more uncertainty towards the intent of her husband’s actions.

When Draco returned, he pulled Hermione to the kitchens to have something to eat although she had no appetite still. George had bowed to both of them and then went off to his room. Draco sent Pansy to her own quarters.

After they had eaten, Draco carried Hermione to the library and sat her down on one of the large sofas by the fire, but by then Hermione’s energy had returned and she had grown restless. She stood up, her arms crossed tightly, and headed to the fireplace to warm herself. Draco followed her.

“How are you feeling now?” He asked.

“Better.”

“That’s good to hear.” His hands were on her shoulders, massaging them. She so badly wanted to shrug them off.

The fire crackled loudly. He had found a knot by the nape of her neck and dug into it, kneading it. Hermione’s head fell back, her expression a mixture of pain and relief. She let him guide her down onto the thick, plush carpet before the fire and lie on her stomach so he could straddle her and massage her better. Hermione supported her head on her arms.

“Why did you have me use a dagger rather than magic to kill her?”

He didn’t falter. “The dagger creates more of a spectacle, don’t you think?”

“Since when do you care about that?” She bit her lip and sighed as his hands traveled to her back and continued to knead her flesh.

"I'll confess it was more for me than the others." He bent forward to kiss her shoulder, whispering huskily in her ear. "The sight of you in all that blood... I can't take my mind off it."

"Why the dagger, Draco? Why have it made for me? Where did it even come from?"

"I needed it," he said simply. "You're not allowed to use your wand yet, and I needed an artifact with the blood of a prisoner on it."

"For what?"

His hands had gone lower down to her ass. He lifted her robe. She was nude underneath. He playfully slapped one cheek hard.

"For a surprise. Now spread your legs and let me taste you."

Hermione kept them shut.

"Not until you tell me what the surprise is."

He gripped her thighs tightly. "Open your legs, wife."

She tried to get up but couldn't. She turned her head to look at him suspiciously, dread gripping her heart.

"Is this about your Horcrux?"

"No," he said simply. "This is about yours."

He wrenched her thighs apart and flipped her over onto her back. She was too wrapped in shock to fight. He held her down with magic as he pushed a pillow under her hips and spread her open with his hands, his tongue greedily taking in the wetness that had collected between her legs as he had massaged her.

Your Horcrux.

Your.

Her head swam. He nipped at her inner thigh gently and she startled, trying to wrestle against his magical binds.

"No."

"It's too late," he said, pausing in his attentions to her body. "It's already begun. And you don't get to decide on this. I said I would still reserve judgment for things I believe are in your best interest, and this is one of them."

"You're ridiculous—Draco... *why?*"

His index and middle fingers busied themselves at her clit, rubbing slowly.

"If I'm going to live forever, you are, too."

And he silenced her and dove back in.

Lucio rubbed at his eyes as Father led him down the hall.

“Is mummy okay?”

Father smiled down at him, his hand wrapped around Lucio’s small little fist. His hand was big and cold. And strong. Sometimes, when he held Lucio’s hand, it would hurt. Lucio didn’t mind. He liked to be brave and squeeze back, hoping one day he would be as strong as him.

“Of course she is. She’s a little ill, but she wanted to say goodnight.”

“Oh. Did you give her medicine, daddy?” He remembered the tonics and draughts that mummy or Pansy would have him take whenever he got ill. They worked, but they tasted dreadful.

“Plenty. I want her to get better.”

They entered the bedroom. It was dimly lit inside. Lucio ran to the bed, where he could make out the shape of someone lying down.

“Mummy!”

He reached her and threw his arms around her, kissed her cheek. She shifted, opened her eyes—they appeared very unfocused but Lucio didn’t notice.

“Hello, my love,” she said, and smiling, kissed his cheek. In the dim light the bruising around her wrists and the fresh bite on her neck barely covered by her hair went unnoticed as well.

“I missed you,” he said, nuzzling her cheek.

“I missed you too, darling,” she said softly. “But I don’t want you to get sick, too.”

Her arms were warm and tight around him.

“Will you read to me?”

“I can’t,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“Pansy will read to you,” father interjected. “Your mother’s very tired. Say goodnight and it’s time for bed.”

“Can’t I sleep with you?” Lucio asked.

“You’re a big boy now,” father said. “You need to sleep in your own room.”

“Just today?” Lucio pleaded. “I want to be with mother.”

“You’ll get sick like me,” mummy said. “And you’ll have to take *lots* of medicine.”

“I don’t care,” Lucio said.

“That’s enough,” father said sternly. “Now say goodnight.”

That was father’s angry voice. Lucio knew not to argue with that tone. It scared him, too.

Saddened, Lucio kissed her on the cheek. She squeezed him tight—she wasn’t as strong as father. She never hurt him. Father had told him once that mummy was strong in many

different ways, and Lucio had wondered what that meant, since father had not said exactly how when he had asked.

“Goodnight, mummy.”

“I love you, Lucio,” she said. There was a little shake to her voice—he thought it was because she was sick.

“I love you, too.”

He slid off the side of the bed. Father led him to the door. Lucio lingered just past the doorframe.

“Will you play with me tomorrow, mummy?”

“Mummy’s got to pose for her portrait tomorrow morning,” father said. “But after lunch, she can.”

“Promise?”

Hermione sat up slowly. “Of course, darling.”

Father shut the door then.

When Draco returned to the bedroom, he magicked his clothes away and went straight to the bed. His Imperius had kept Hermione restrained to the bed, eyes still unfocused and slightly vacant.

“I’m sorry I had to do that,” he said after he ended the spell and she sat up and stared at him accusingly with wet, angry eyes. “I wasn’t sure how you would act without assistance.”

“You didn’t *have* to do anything.”

“You’re still too emotional,” he said. “Control it better, and maybe he won’t worry about you all the time.”

She went still. He watched as his words sank in and she reached the devastating realization that yes, he had used Occlumency on his own son.

Monster, her glare accused.

I know, sweetheart, I know.

He felt almost sympathetic. But his eyes told her something else.

I may be a monster, but I’m not the only one anymore, and I’ll make sure you never forget it.

As if she knew his exact thoughts, her glare smoothed into stone. He watched her avidly, his Medusa—beautiful, haunted—deadly.

“You don’t trust me,” she said flatly. “I made a promise and I said I would join you. I’ve obeyed you. *I killed* for you. And you can’t even trust me to interact with my own son.”

"I wasn't sure what to expect from you," he said. "That's the last time I'll use the Imperius on you. I swear it, Hermione."

She watched him, expressionless. He turned and went into the bathroom. She heard the shower begin to run. Hermione turned onto her side, holding herself.

That's as close to an apology as I'll get for now, she thought. But he still thinks he was right to do it.

And was he?

After the news he had given her—after pinning her down and using her, her emotions had been warped with shock and anger. Pansy had knocked on the door before Draco had even finished—an unspoken rule had been broken—but she had told him Lucio was worried about his mother and refused to go to bed until he had seen her. Draco had sworn gently and let her go; she had been about to leave the library, preparing to go see her son when he had placed her under the Imperius and ordered her to wait in the bedroom for him to return.

She had been numb, trapped, wanting to rage against the magic that held her.

'If I'm going to live forever, you are, too.'

Eternity with Draco. The thought made her feel more hollow than ever. How far along was he in the process of making her Horcrux, then? Did this mean he had already made his own? She eyed him carefully now—he had disrobed upon entering the room, and she saw no discernible sign that marked him as a Horcrux-haver....but then again, she didn't even know the signs. Were there even any? Voldemort had been disfigured and transformed only because of the horrendous number of Horcruxes he'd made—if Draco only made one, could he still appear totally normal?

Research was needed here. If she asked, would he tell her? Did their library have anything useful on the subject? She wasn't sure—she had never thought to look before.

Then there was the dagger. An artifact with blood of the innocent. That was clearly part of the process. Her face went hot with anger—he had tricked her. In getting her to agree to join him and play her part, he had forced her into something undisclosed that she never would have wanted if she had known beforehand.

I'll make you pay for that as well, husband. And I'll fight to the last to make sure that Horcrux isn't completed.

Draco emerged from the bathroom, wet, a towel loose around his hips. He dried himself off and came into bed beside her, sitting against the headboard, his hand reaching down to where she lay to stroke her curls.

"There's no use running from it," he said gently. "It *will* happen."

"You tricked me."

"There was no other way to get you agree."

"I *didn't* agree. I never would."

“That’s why I had to, little bird. How could you be my equal if you stayed mortal? I won’t have you leaving me.”

“You should have let me die the first time I tried to kill myself.”

His hand went still.

“I won’t trick you again.”

“Don’t condescend to me, because we both know you’ll still do it,” she hissed, turning quickly to glare at him. “Don’t you tell me I’m your equal and then blindfold me again, bastard.”

He held her by the throat gently. She stilled.

“There’s my firebird,” he murmured, dark adoration in his eyes.

“Neither of us needs to live forever,” she said. “You, especially.”

“Why not?” He asked. ‘When I’ve got everything I want in you, and a line of enemies to taunt and play with, and coin enough to see us happily through several lifetimes? I intend to enjoy it for as long as I can, and I will. *We will.*’ He gave a low chuckle, bent down to kiss her. He bit down on her lower lip, felt her gasp of pain. He licked away a bead of blood. “You know how greedy I am, Hermione. Don’t pretend this really surprised you that much.”

She stared at him, her lower lip red. Her pulse was steady and calm in his hand.

“How do you make a Horcrux?”

He smiled and said nothing.

“I’ll find out,” she said. “One way or another. I’ll ask Nott if I have to.”

His hold on her neck tightened painfully.

“What he knows about Horcruxes couldn’t fill a thimble,” he said, drawing his face closer to hers. “And you’re not to touch him without my order.”

“I never said anything about touching,” she said through grit teeth. “But perhaps he was right—he would make a kinder husband than you have been.”

It was getting hard to breathe. She could feel her face turning red. But her words had worked—she recognized jealousy in Draco’s eyes.

“You’d prefer him, would you?” He asked in a low voice that made her skin crawl.

“He’d answer my question.”

His lips curved. “You’d have to fuck him to get your answer.”

“A small price to pay.”

Something gleamed in his eyes. Approval? More jealousy?

He spoke after a moment of tense deliberation.

“I didn’t want to tell you the process because I wasn’t sure you could handle it. It’s awful, my love. I did it easily for my Horcrux. But you’re not like me. Not yet, and I fear it might

ruin you if it isn't done carefully."

"When did you do it?"

"Here and there," he said. "Doesn't have to be done all at once. I'm sure you've noticed my absences over the past few months."

His grip on her throat had relaxed slowly, but he didn't let her go. Hermione inhaled gratefully, never breaking eye contact. His eyes were on her lips.

"All you've ever done since the moment you trapped me with you was try to ruin me," she said.

Draco smiled ruefully.

"No, sweetheart—I wanted to *break* you, not ruin you. But not completely—just enough to drill it into that head of yours that this was your fate. Why would I want to ruin you? I'd lose every aspect of you that makes me want you and made me choose you."

He nuzzled his face into her throat.

"The Horcrux tears at the soul. It takes a piece of it, transfers it to the vessel of your choosing. It turns you. I barely even feel it now that it's done, but it might be different for you since you're still so... human."

He said the last word affectionately, kissed her pulse point in her throat afterward.

"*That's* why I worry. *That's* why I want you to control your emotions. *That's* why I had you kill last night, and why you'll do it again. It will hone your soul to horror, and help you resist what the Horcrux might want to strip from you." He kissed her there again, nibbled gently on her flesh. "I won't rush the Horcrux—you'll have plenty of time to prepare, and I'll lead you through it step by step."

"What did it take from you?" She asked, almost breathless as his teeth continued to worry at her throat. He paused and his tongue smoothed over the irritation he'd created in her skin.

"I had nothing left for it to take, so it gave me something in return." Hermione tensed, her hands on his chest.

"What was it?"

"Besides immortality?" He chuckled. His tongue licked a slow, heavy stripe against her throat again. Hermione shifted, uneasy, but his hands had latched on to her and kept her still easily. Hermione held her breath—had the Horcrux made him stronger? He bit gently on her throat again.

"Let me in, little bird," he said, almost sing-song. "Let me in."

"What was it?" She asked urgently. Her heart pounded.

"Knowledge," he said, his voice rich and insidious. "I know Longbottom found you."

Hermione froze.

"And you didn't tell me, wife."

He bit her harder. She jerked.

“Draco—”

His hand was on her throat again, squeezing. Hermione struggled against him.

“I know what he said to you.”

“No—please!”

“I *know* your *plan*.”

In one effortless, startling movement, he had pinned her against the headboard, his hand still around her throat. Hermione writhed, trying to free herself, terror clogging her throat.

“Draco, stop!”

He gave her a crushing kiss. When he pulled back, she was gasping for breath, her face a dark red. She kicked out frantically.

“You thought you could deceive me forever? You’ve only succeeded in separating yourself from them more. Why would they want you back now, after what you’ve done? When your soul is tainted and torn from the Horcrux, there’ll be nothing left for them to love.”

There was a red tinge to his eyes when he came in close to her face, snarling. Hermione shrank back, pushing at his chest, but he was made of rock and she was nothing but a weak, worn twig that would snap in half the further she pushed back.

“Now *you’re* going to be the one to destroy Longbottom,” he said. “It’s only fitting, I suppose. I killed Potter, and you’ll squash their pathetic resistance for good when they see you cut him down.”

“No!”

Fuzzy black spots danced over her vision. Hermione shook her head as if that might clear them away.

Will he finally kill me this time?

Draco was at her throat again, his free hand groping at her breast, then moving down to busy itself between her legs, having pushed her robe open to gain access there. Again? She whimpered in pain. He was probably still angry he had been interrupted earlier.

She pushed at him again, glancing wildly around the room, tried to open her mouth to scream for Pansy—the door was already open a fraction—when?

He bit sharply down on her neck and she grunted at the stab of pain.

“Don’t—what are you doing?”

He didn’t answer, and drove his bite in deeper. Hermione screamed with what little air she had left, writhing against him. A grotesque horror dawned over her as she felt him begin to *suck* at the hot blood that began to leak from the wound—she felt about to pass out—she glanced at the door one more time, and saw a darkened figure dart away. Her first oxygen-deprived thought was that it had been George, but George was tall, and this figure was much shorter.

No. He had seen.

No, no, no.

Something cracked inside her. A small crack, but enough for a leak.

That was all she needed.

Draco moaned at her throat, his fingers busy inside her despite the fact that she was dry. She tried to speak, but all that came out was a choked gasp. The pain, fear and hate merged and flared. She felt the heat of her blood as it ran down her throat, the suction of his drinking, the kindling of fire underneath her ribcage like a hearth lighting up at last in a long-abandoned home.

If he didn't let her breathe right now, she was going to pass out, or die. She couldn't tell, but the sluggishness of her mind wasn't a good indicator—she wondered what color her face was now. But the power, however meager it was, flowing through her right now, called her to action immediately.

She reached up to put her hands on his shoulders, and shoved, harnessing magic behind the movement, because she might not have his physical strength, but she could emulate it through other means. He fell onto his back on the bed, almost falling off it entirely, but caught himself. She took in deep breaths quickly, rushing off the bed, lightheaded with her first taste of conscious magic and his suffocation. She fell on the first step but scrambled back up, breathing deep, feeling her head clear slowly.

He had sat up now, his eyes furious and shocked, his mouth red and slick with her blood. She caught his eyes darting down to her hand to see if she had somehow taken off the ring, but the ring sat on her finger in its permanent spot and he met her eye, astounded and

afraid.

She looked down at her hands. They were shaking. Blood still ran down her neck—she felt a little dizzy.

She walked up to him. He sat there, unmoving, as she brought her hands to his neck, cupping it between her hands. His pulse was steady under her touch.

He was in awe. Wary. Still furious.

“How did you do it?”

“I don't know.”

She pulled back one hand, stared at it, as her thumbnail hardened and turned into one long, deadly talon.

He watched and smiled. His teeth gleamed.

“Go on. Do it.”

She had not expected him to goad her on. She had only wanted to frighten him. Now, with his permission, she could turn one of her longest-held fantasies into reality. She looked back at him. He was staring at her talon appreciatively.

"You know that won't fix anything."

"I know," she said. "But it'll feel good."

She positioned her talon on one side of his neck.

He stared up at her, the fury gone. Somehow, he looked more adoring than ever in his cold, cruel way. His lips curved. He took her other hand and kissed it.

"Goodnight, sweetheart. I'll see you in the morning."

Neither broke their stare as she slashed his throat, and his blood ran over her like a waterfall.

Hermione found Pansy and Lucio in his nursery. Lucio was asleep in his bed and Pansy was pale and anxiously waiting by the door. She saw Hermione, drenched in blood, and covered her mouth, rushed to her.

"What's happened?"

"He ordered you to stay here after he brought Lucio back, didn't he?"

"Yes. Even if you called." Pansy shook her head. "I felt you call. I wanted to go but there was a barrier at the door and I couldn't Apparate. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Hermione said.

"How did you get away?"

"I'll tell you later." They rushed into the bathroom. Pansy set to healing Hermione's neck at once.

"He drank my blood," Hermione said, nausea twisting inside her. "He drank it."

Now that the adrenaline and her high from the magic had worn off, everything was hitting her at once.

"He's bitten me before, but he's never drank from me like that." She blinked back tears. "I thought he might actually kill me then. I couldn't breathe."

Pansy hugged her tightly. "I'm so sorry."

Hermione gripped her arms. "*Did Lucio leave this room at any point?*"

"Yes," Pansy said. He said he wanted a snack—I couldn't summon one or leave to get him one and the Toffee wouldn't come when we called for her. He said he'd grab something and come right back so I let him. When he came back he wouldn't talk and I don't even think he'd eaten anything."

Hermione's stomach sank.

"I knew I saw someone at the door."

Pansy's face went ashen.

“...Where is he, my Lady?” Pansy’s eyes were on Hermione’s blood-soaked robe.

“In the bedroom.”

“You did this?”

Hermione went to the sink and peeled the robe off—it had been so saturated, blood had smeared onto her skin underneath.

“I gave him a small fraction of his due. He’ll be back tomorrow morning, he said.”

“I’m sure,” Pansy said faintly. “He told you about the Horcrux.”

Hermione nodded. She was staring down at her hands again.

“I used magic,” she whispered. “I’m not sure how. I felt it again... inside me. Even though ___”

She brought her hand closer to her face and angled it to view the ring better. “I don’t understand. Not yet. But it saved my life.”

“You saved your life, my Lady,” Pansy said. “Magic has no mind of its own.”

Hermione turned on the shower. “I don’t know how I can face my son now.”

Sensing that Hermione wasn’t looking for an answer to her statement, Pansy slipped out of the bathroom and waited until Hermione emerged. Pansy had summoned a set of clothes for her to change into. Hermione wiped at her eyes, utterly fatigued.

There was another bed for Pansy nearby. Pansy looked too on edge for sleep.

“If you need anything, I’m right here,” she said, squeezing Hermione’s hand.

As she crawled into the bed, Lucio shifted like he was about to wake. Hermione reached out and hugged him to her carefully.

“Mummy?”

“Yes, my love.”

He rubbed at his eye. “I had another bad dream.”

Dream?

“What was it?”

“Father was hurting you,” he said. “I saw blood, mummy. I was scared.”

“It’s okay,” she said softly, stroking his hair. His cheeks were sticky as if he had been crying before she had arrived. Her heart ached. “It’s okay. I’m here.”

“Did Father really hurt you?”

Hermione hesitated. “Yes, my love. He did. Your father is not a good man.”

He never has been.

“Why?” Lucio asked.

Oh, my love, she thought sadly. I could go on and on. But you're too young to hear it.

She began to hum an old song softly to lull him to sleep. It had been a favorite of hers once. Little Lucio drifted back to sleep almost immediately, and Hermione held him close, staring out the window until the sun rose, and even Pansy had fallen asleep, and she felt rather than heard her husband's resurrection. His presence sank heavily back into the house as if he had never left it. Her ring seemed to sense it, too—it pulsed weirdly three times, just as she heard a knock on the nursery door at six in the morning.

11. The Turning

Surprise! I'm not dead. 2020 has been very rocky so far, I think we can all agree on that, so I hope you'll forgive me for being away for so long. I honestly can't say when the next updates for this story or WWKOW will be but do know I'm working on them bit by bit! Cheers xx

Hermione slipped from the bed, her heart pounding, but not in fear.

There had been one knock at the door and no more—her eyes had opened from her deep slumber and she had sat up, looking toward Lucio, and then to Pansy, expecting them to have woken, too, but they remained fast asleep.

She waited tensely for another knock, but there was only silence, and the heavy expectation in the air, emanating from the door from her husband's presence on the other side of it.

She went to the door silently, not wanting to wake Lucio or Pansy, even as deep within her the certainty grew with every step that Draco had made sure only she would hear his arrival, or that he had somehow enchanted them to stay asleep.

Better that way, she told herself. She wasn't entirely sure what to expect once she opened that door. Whatever happened, it wouldn't be good. That was the only certainty.

As she crossed the nursery she straightened the satin slip she had slept in, wishing she'd thought to summon a robe, as the atmosphere had gone quite cold upon the start of the knocking.

Her sleep had been dreamless—she had instantly sunk into it gratefully, her arms wrapped around her son, who had held her just as tightly, but sometime in the night they had come apart and when she had woken his little face was pressed into his pillow and he was facing away from her, bundled heavily in his blankets.

She had finally reached the door. She wanted to hesitate, give herself a minute to steel herself, but that heavy expectancy in the air intensified as she approached, and she sensed Draco might be losing his patience, although she was also certain that he would stand there and haunt that door until she cracked. Were Lucio not in the room, she knew he would have broken it down the second he'd come back.

She opened it and met her husband.

She had not known what to expect in terms of appearance—at once, his eyes swallowed her whole, taking her in as though they'd been apart for months rather than hours.

Her eyes had instantly gone to his throat, her hand clenching at the memory of her talon slicing it open. The power in that action had been so heady, she had staggered slightly at its

wake. He had noticed, even as his blood had streamed out in thick rivers, and had given her a knowing smile.

He was devoid of any marks from the night before. He looked fresh. Whole.

Why did you expect otherwise, even knowing he's got a Horcrux? She asked herself.

Perhaps it was the vain, insignificant little wish that she had actually dealt him any damage at all. She eyed his throat again.

Apparently not.

He seemed not to be in any pain, either—what she was most concerned about was whether he was angry or not. She was about to find out.

She knew he could hear her heart pounding. His gaze had fallen to her chest as she watched him, the corner of his mouth lifting, and then it had traveled up to her throat, where despite Pansy's healing from the night before, a dark bruise remained where he had fed from her.

The memory of his sucking at her neck—the *feel* of the suction resurfaced, and she fought the urge to take a step back—he noticed this, too, and his eyes glazed over, as if he too was reliving the memory, but not in horror. In lust.

He had washed up and changed into clean clothing—he looked as if nothing had happened at all. And he had his Horcrux to thank.

For the first time, she found herself wondering what item he had chosen to harbor that splinter of his soul.

Where have you hidden it, husband?

He held out his hand to her, his eyes like a cell, trapping her gaze within his.

Hermione took it—she'd had half a mind to rip his throat open again or this time, go straight for his heart—but he was right. He would only come back, but it would give her peace of mind for another couple of hours. Quickly, her curiosity stopped her.

I want answers.

He led her closer to him, and she stumbled as he caught her in both arms and lifted her bridal style as easily as if she was a light blanket. Hermione caught her breath, steadying herself by looping one arm around his neck, bracing the other against his chest—pleased, he squeezed her thigh and began to carry her through the corridor. Hermione heard the door to the nursery close behind them.

“How did it feel to die?” She asked.

He smiled. “Very much like sleeping. I saw you leave—everything went dark. I felt very little pain. When I woke up, I was healed. I would have gone to you then, but there was something I had to do first.”

“What was it?”

“Research.”

She frowned.

“Give that it was my first time dying, the regeneration will occur faster over time as my body acquaints itself to the process, or it builds up the proper resistance all at once. Just a theory—there’s only so much research can be done on this without having done it before. When he was alive, Voldemort wasn’t the most forthcoming when I’d ask him about it.” He smiled wryly. “Then again, he didn’t have a murderess wife to experiment with.”

“You wanted me to do it,” she reminded him. “I would have tried anyway, but without your permission, I wouldn’t have been able to.”

“That’s why I gave it to you,” he said. ‘I was curious about what would happen. That, and how could I deny that fire in your eyes?’ His voice was molten, rich with anticipation. “Oh, sweetheart, it won’t take much more to turn you. I can feel it.”

A chill crept up her spine. *Your feeling is wrong. I’ll fight you to the last.*

Her hand slid up his chest and to his throat, where she had cut him—she felt for a scar. Nothing. He almost purred. His pulse was slow and strong.

“Did that make you feel better?” He asked. “Killing me?”

She closed her eyes, recalling the feel of that power. “Yes.”

They had reached the library. The doors opened at their arrival, and Draco walked them through to the sofa at the fireplace, which was already high and roaring. He sat down in one of the corners with her still in his arms, sighing, one hand on her upper arm, holding her to his chest.

His other hand caught her chin and tilted it up so he could kiss her lightly.

I’m kissing a dead man.

He kissed her again, more slowly, his tongue slipping into her mouth.

“Darling, killer bird,” he breathed as they broke apart briefly. He kissed her nose, her cheek. “How did you do it?”

She knew what he meant.

“I felt something break inside me,” she said, taking care to measure her tone. “I saw someone at the door. And you wanted them there.”

“Did I?” His lips found hers again. “What makes you think that?”

“You kept Pansy from coming to help me,” she said when he broke the kiss, drawing in a sharp breath as he nipped at her lower lip, which was still tender from his assault of it the night before. “But you lured Lucio out to see.”

He inhaled the scent of her hair. She felt him smile against her. “Now why would I want that?”

“You think he’s too soft,” she said, her anger building again. “You think it’s time he knows the truth.”

His heavy-lidded gaze challenged hers. “Is that so wrong?”

She dug her claws into his chest. “He is a *child*. He told me he saw it. You might have traumatized him!”

Draco held her more tightly.

“What will lying to him accomplish, Hermione? He’ll find out the entire truth one way or another no matter how well you think you can protect him. What happens when he goes off to school and he hears it all from others and realizes he’s been lied to all his life?”

“You might have asked me instead of taking it into your own hands in that way. What kind of father are you to want your child to see that?”

“I only want what’s best for him, and if exposing him to a harsh truth makes me a bad father, then what are you for wanting to keep him from it?”

He *can’t* know the truth, Draco.”

“Why not? Do you want him to resent you for lying to him? Do you think he’ll trust you then?”

“I don’t want him to think of me as *weak*!” She admitted in an agonized hiss. ‘He’ll be like the others. It will take him a long time to understand why I couldn’t run away, why I couldn’t fight you even though I tried.’ She let out a dry, ragged sob. “I’ve tried so hard to get away from you, for years—and I still see it in the eyes of the people we see when we’re outside. They think you kidnapping me is a lie I made up to mask my shame for betraying them by marrying you.”

Draco stroked her arm.

“You can be comforted in the fact that you didn’t betray them willingly,” he said calmly. “You’ve fought me every step of the way that led us here, and while it *does* try my patience, I admire your resilience. You needn’t care for their judgment—they see the lie we feed them, why do you need to convince them of the truth at this point?”

Hermione shook her head. “That girl—she died thinking I’m a traitor.”

“You *are* a traitor.”

She shut her eyes tightly.

“You killed a member of their resistance. Longbottom might know about it by now, or he might not. But he will. Do you think that will soften your case? You’ve willingly joined me. Publicly. There’s no coming back from that.”

Her heart sank.

There has to be.

“Don’t give yourself hope, sweetling,” he said as if knowing her thought. “Remember that what they think doesn’t matter. In the end, it won’t make a difference because you made a promise, and you’re going to keep it. Whether that confirms their beliefs or not, I don’t care. You’re mine anyway, and they are all beneath us.”

He leaned down to kiss her again—Hermione leaned away.

“What about Lucio, then? You let him see part of what you did to me last night—do you know how humiliating that feels? He’s my *son*! Think of what seeing that will do to him! But all you care about is being right.” She took in a long breath and let it out slowly. “My worry is that he’ll see me as the others do.”

Draco went still.

“If he *ever* begins to think of you as weak or pitiful, I’ll have him whipped,” he said stiffly, and her blood ran cold.

“*Don’t you dare!*”

“But that day won’t come, sweetheart. He knows you’re strong. He feels it.” His lips curved. “And he’ll think you the strongest witch alive for surviving a marriage with a monster like me.”

Hermione shook her head. “He doesn’t need to know, Draco. Please.”

“He might even hate me once he learns the truth,” Draco added thoughtfully. “Isn’t that what you want? I know you worry about how much he loves me.”

Hermione went still, torn.

Draco stroked her jawline, trailed his touch to her cheek.

“I’m tired of concealing it, firebird. No son of mine will live in deceit. He needs to know the truth to shape him into who he’s meant to be.”

“And what is he meant to be?” She asked softly, angrily. “A copy of you? That’s what *you* want.”

“Even *I* don’t want a copy of me, sweetheart. That’s the point of the Horcrux. I’m the only one of me there is. He’ll be his own person, but he will *not* be weak. This settles the matter.”

She shook her head, her hand digging deeper into his flesh, drawing blood.

“As for trauma—” he chuckled. “What child survives their early years without a dose of it in some shape or form?”

“I did,” she said through a clenched jaw. “My father and mother loved each other, and when they fought, they did so respectfully and without hate.”

“Remind me to send them flowers, then, for creating such a spitfire despite that.”

“Don’t you pretend I was always like this. You’ve given me *every* reason possible to hate you.”

He met her withering stare.

“Yes, I have. But don’t *you* play at being mightier when you have been unfaithful, and when you conspired with my enemy and attempted to keep it secret.”

“I was unfaithful because I had just escaped a demented marriage I never consented to, and wanted to be with the man I really loved!”

Draco’s eyes flashed in warning.

“And Longbottom?” He asked, pinning her with his stare. “You love him, too, or you wouldn’t say his name as you sleep. Interesting that you never utter Potter’s, but then perhaps that’s because I forbid you from it. Would you fuck Longbottom, too, if you had the chance?”

Stunned, Hermione stared at Draco.

“Of course you didn’t know—you’re deep asleep when it happens,” he said, and the jealousy that stirred in his eye frightened her. “But I hear it every time. I don’t like to hear another man’s name on my wife’s lips.”

“Draco—”

His hold on her tightened painfully. She winced.

“Do you love him?”

“Only like a brother,” she said hurriedly. “I swear it.”

He stared angrily into her eyes, so close that she kept herself from swallowing, knowing that he’d hear it. The fire crackled away loudly, unnoticed by both of them.

“I swear it,” she repeated. Slowly, his hold relaxed.

“But you still say his name, regardless of what type of love it is,” he said. “Why is that?”

Hermione shrugged, exasperated. “Because I worry about him!”

“How long ago did your encounter happen?”

“A few weeks ago,” she said, uncertain. “The day I went to the Weasley’s home with Pansy.”

“Is that where they’re hiding?”

Hermione blanched, and he grinned.

“Tell me, wife.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “He said they’re there sometimes. I don’t think they’re actually based there.”

“So they have a secret location at the Weasley’s old house.”

She hesitated, her heart tearing in two.

Traitor, traitor. Neville, forgive me.

Draco held her more tightly.

“I order you to tell me. Don’t force me to Imperius you, Hermione.”

She couldn’t speak. She made herself nod, forcing back the tears that threatened to fall.

Draco thumbed away the rebellious tear at the end of her eye.

“Don’t you dare cry for them. You are on *my* side now. We’ll go tomorrow and you will show me the location.”

His face showed nothing, but his tone was flush with satisfaction. Hermione looked away and made a silent prayer that Neville and Luna had long since abandoned that secret hideout and left no trace.

Draco caught her chin again, turned her to face him.

"Don't think of it as betrayal anymore," he said. "You're doing your part, and pleasing your husband in the process."

She wanted to slap him.

"Tell me what happened before you realized you could use magic again," he said. "In detail."

She was sweating from the fire, from him pressing his body against hers. Or was it a fever? She couldn't tell.

"Close your eyes and think of it," he instructed.

Her eyes fell shut—by her own volition or his command? She took a breath.

"You—you were restraining me," she said. "You'd told me you knew about Neville. I was frightened. I really thought you were going to kill me. I couldn't breathe. Could barely think."

"I only meant for you to pass out," he said smoothly, and her skin crawled. "Keep going."

"Your hands were everywhere," she continued. "You were hurting me. I couldn't take anymore, but you were at my neck. You've bitten me to the point of drawing blood before, but you've *never* drunk from me like that. I was horrified, growing weaker. You were like an animal—I was going to call for Pansy to help me—I thought you'd finally truly lost your mind. The door was open, and I saw someone running away."

Draco's hand settled on her waist. His tongue dragged against her jaw. She flinched, fearing it would travel down to her neck.

"Keep going."

"I... I thought it was George at first. But I realized it had to be Lucio because of the height. I was shocked—angry, terrified. I knew he'd seen. I thought I would burst. I felt something crack open inside me... I felt *power*. I felt I could be as strong as you if I wasn't so out of sorts and panicking. I knew I had to get away. I didn't know how much further you'd go if I didn't stop you. I tried to match your strength, or gather just enough to push you off because I knew a few moments more of it and I'd pass out or die."

"How did it feel to have magic again?" He asked, his voice low and guttural, his hot breath washing over her skin. The hand at her waist was heated enough that she was perspiring under her slip, sticking it to her skin. His other hand migrated down to the hem of the slip, slid beneath it, and traveled the short distance up her inner thighs to where they met and found her wet.

"I gather it made you feel *very* good," he said in a low rasp.

"Yes," she admitted, slightly ashamed, squirming as he began to stroke her. "I'd wanted it for so long. I was shocked, but I wasn't going to question it until after I got away. It felt like

coming home after years of being away.”

He was caressing her, stoking that heat between her thighs.

“Stop,” she murmured without conviction. Her nails retreated from their burrowing into his skin. Her hips shifted in his lap, wanting more friction immediately. She was already frustratingly close.

“No,” he said. “Keep going.”

“I’ve had so long to imagine how I’d want to get revenge,” she said, her head falling back into his chest. Her hips jerked as he applied more pressure. “So damn long. I’ve had so many ideas.”

His tongue crawled up her throat—she shivered.

“Tell me some of them.”

She expelled a loud breath as his fingers worked away at her, her eyes still closed again.

“Tying you up in the mattress springs and setting you on fire. Spearing you through from groin to throat. Cutting your stupid cock off and letting you bleed out. Gouging your eyes out so you’ll stop bloody staring at me. Using my bare hands to tear your chest open and carve out your heart.”

Something pushed inside her and she couldn’t hold back her moan. He had pulled her slip up to her waist and undone his trousers and she hadn’t even noticed. He filled her slightly past capacity and she clenched around him more tightly as his fingers resumed their work at her clit, her hips bucking again. He groaned softly behind her, his hands latching onto her waist.

“Ride,” he ordered. She needed no further urging, and spreading her thighs open wider, bracing her arms on his thighs, began to ride him. He moaned loudly.

“Setting the whole manor on fire with you trapped inside,” she continued, nearly breathless. “Crucioing you until your mind breaks. Stabbing you with a dull knife until I get through to your heart.”

She broke off in a gasp as he grabbed her by the hips and began to thrust hard into her. Hermione threw her head back and bit her lip, moaning helplessly.

“Such a creative little bird,” he said roughly, slowing down. A hand left her hip to cup a breast, pinching her nipple. The other returned to her clit and she bucked again, panting.

“Who else would be better suited to kill me than you?” He asked, his fingers picking up speed, knowing it was just how she liked it. She was gripping him more and more, he knew she was close. “Well, you may try those out as much as you like now that there’ll be no consequence. But only in private, sweet. Remember that. I’ll not have you acting your little fantasies in front of others. That’s only for me. Understood?”

“Yes, my Lord,” she panted, and a second later she gasped and climaxed, quivering in his lap, her contracting muscles coaxing his cock closer to completion.

He continued thrusting when she was too weak to continue, and climaxed soon after her, gasping as he pumped his semen into her, his fingers still busy at her clit, which had grown

quite sensitive in the aftermath of her orgasm.

She tried to push his hand away. “That’s too much,” she said. He gave her a brief respite, withdrawing his hand to push her onto her back, his strong body covering hers as he pushed into her again and began to thrust slowly. He restrained her hands together above her head. His fingers returned to her clit, and she jolted, over-sensitized.

“That’s too much,” she repeated, her expression puckering from pain and pleasure.

Draco covered her mouth, used magic to draw her legs up over his shoulders to push deeper inside her. She groaned into his palm, her eyes shut as he thrust roughly, his balls heavy and slapping against her body. He buried his head into her throat, low, pleased growls emitting from him between harsh pants.

Hermione’s body was growing taut. She was close again. Her hips bucked into his, briefly disrupting his rhythm but he picked back up easily, slowing his thrusts to a steady grind, watching avidly how her body responded at once, how her peaked nipples just begged for his mouth, how her eyes had opened and she watched him through that lust-glaze in her eyes. Something inside him roared with victory.

You’re turning more easily than you thought, little bird, he thought, pleased. Have you noticed yet, how quickly you’re giving in?

He released her hands to see what she would do.

Instantly, her hands latched onto his head, drawing him closer so they were nose to nose. Draco grinned and kissed her, his tongue claiming hers. He felt her legs shake underneath him, the delicious press of her breasts against him, the relentless clutch of her body holding him tightly. When they broke for air Hermione’s hands went down to his arse and urged him deeper inside, climaxing a moment later, her expression one of such pleased torment that it neared him to the edge.

It won’t be long, now.

Draco roared as he came, pressed as far as he could go inside her, his seed filling her again. They lay there together for a moment, recuperating, still experiencing the aftershocks of their climaxes. When her vaginal muscles had stopped contracting around him, he pulled out—she winced. Draco reclined on his knees, breathing heavily—his eyes stuck to where his semen was trickling thickly from her, mixed with her glorious wetness.

He twitched a finger, vanishing most of their mess off the sofa. At the same time, her womb glowed a soft yellow. Recognizing it as the contraceptive spell, Hermione sat up gingerly, enormously relieved.

“Are you a vampire?” She asked after a moment, readjusting her slip.

Buoyed from the sex, Draco laughed.

“Not that I’m aware.”

She frowned. “Then why, last night...?” Her hand came up to cup her throat where he had drank from her.

He smiled, and she had been suspecting but saw it clearer now—his teeth were slightly sharper than before.

“Impulse. I don’t know why I did it. I just wanted to.”

She didn’t look convinced.

“Open the curtains.”

He smiled, amused, and opened them all so that suddenly the entire library was flooded with early morning sunlight.

Nothing happened.

She looked more perplexed than ever.

“It’s just a blood fetish, little bird,” he said and stood. ‘Although I’ve never drunk from anybody the way I did to you.’ He held out a hand to help her stand. “Freshen up and get dressed. Martin will be here soon. It’s about time we get that portrait finished.”

“What do you think, my Lord?” Martin was asking Draco, who had reentered the library. “I am nearly finished—only the details of the face need final touches.”

Hermione had met Martin first in the library after having washed up and put on the green dress. Draco had gone to see to Pansy and Lucio, and ordered Bogg to have lunch ready sooner than usual. Nobody had had breakfast yet—Hermione had passed by George’s room as she’d gone back to the library and had knocked, not knowing what to say, but wanting to see his face.

Did he know anything about what had happened in the past few hours? Had Draco told him in advance? She didn’t know. It wasn’t very likely, but she had to make sure. He hadn’t answered the door, however, so she gave up and moved along.

Martin had looked at her strangely when she had come in and greeted him—his stare lasted a little longer than normal and she had asked him what the matter was, but he had said nothing but good morning, and shown her the painting in its current state.

He had been working on it since the last time they’d met. The background was nearly complete, and through all its fine details and his masterful techniques, Hermione felt as if she were looking through a window at herself through the eyes of a stranger. It was a feeling she wasn’t quite sure how to process. Were the pose not so forced and the dress not so revealing she would have appreciated it more—she looked at her painted image and recognized herself, but barely.

Why are you surprised? This is a painting for Draco, not for you.

She hoped he would hang it somewhere only he could see.

Draco stepped up to the large canvas, appraising the painted image coolly for a long time. Martin waited tensely to the side.

"You do my wife justice," Draco said at last. "It is exquisite. Your skills seem beyond your years."

Martin flushed deeply with relief and pleasure. "You are very kind, my Lord."

Draco stared at the painting again for a moment, then his eyes flicked over to Hermione, who had been watching him. He was frowning slightly.

"I want you to make another of my wife," he was saying, his eyes still locked onto Hermione's. "Once you are finished with the others."

Martin bowed. "I am at your service, my Lord."

Draco nodded and crossed the space to where Hermione still lounged on the chaise, watching him warily. He sat down at the end of the thing by her feet, placed his hand on her exposed leg.

"Lucio has sent me to remind you that you promised you'd play with him today."

Hermione smiled. "Of course. I'd never forget. I look forward to it."

When he had left, Hermione sat for fifteen more minutes until Martin declared he was done, and she gratefully rose from the divan and stretched, adjusted her gown.

"You have been a remarkably good model, my Lady," Martin said as she approached the canvas. "Many, many of my subjects are prone to fidgeting."

"I've found it's harder to fidget when I'm being stared at," Hermione said. "May I see?"

"Please."

The finished painting truly was exquisite. Now that her face was completed, she recognized herself better, more so in image than spirit. She wished it had been made under different circumstances. She looked at herself in Draco's chosen pose and blushed. Still, she admired his skill.

"I'm glad you'll be painting more for us," she said. "You have a gift."

Martin bowed. "My lady, you honor me." He cleared his throat. "I understand from your husband that I must also paint a portrait of the whole family."

Hermione nodded.

"It's his wish to immortalize us all together."

"Mummy, look at that bird! It's so big!"

Hermione spied the falcon Lucio had pointed to, sitting high up on the tree closest to them.

"It really is," she said. "That's a falcon, my love."

"A falcon," Lucio repeated, making a face. "That word is funny."

Hermione smiled. "Yes, it is. But that's its name."

"I saw a cat yesterday," Lucio said importantly, pausing in his walk to attempt to kick a mound of dirt. "It was grey and Pansy said it was old but it came up to me and sniffed my hand."

"It didn't bite you, did it?" Hermione asked.

"No, Pansy let me touch it but then it ran away." Lucio resumed walking, taking Hermione's hand in his. "I like cats. Why can't we have a pet, mummy?"

"Your father doesn't like animals very much."

"Not even cats? Or dogs?"

"No, love."

Lucio looked toward the pond. "What about a frog?"

Hermione laughed.

"When you're older and start going to school, you'll be allowed to have a pet. How does that sound?"

"But that's so long!"

"You may talk to your father about it," Hermione said, "but I'm sure he'll agree with me."

She squeezed his hand. "Think about it. I had a cat when I was in school. Many of my friends had owls."

"Why an owl?"

Hermione paused.

"Owls carry mail for us," she explained. Draco was the only one in the family who received mail or packages at all though the post so Lucio not knowing about it had surprised her for a moment. Seeing as Draco received post in the privacy of his study where they couldn't bother him unless summoned, it had been some time since Hermione had seen an owl that wasn't untamed. She saw owls frequently in their lands and in the villages beyond but knew at once by looking at them, they were not the sort trained or used by magical folk for post.

"Really?" Lucio was asking. "I want to see!"

"You'll have to ask your father about that, too," Hermione said. "I don't get any post."

At the mention of his father, Lucio went quiet and held Hermione's hand a little more tightly.

"Now," Hermione said as they reached a large tree with a comfortable looking, shaded area underneath its span. "What do you think about having lunch here?"

"Okay."

Hermione set the basket she had been carrying down and sat promptly on the earthen ground. Lucio followed suit. A playful breeze ruffled their hair and threatened to balloon her

skirt. Hermione tucked the excess fabric underneath her legs, wishing that Draco would for *once* give her a pair of trousers.

Pansy had helped them pack the basket after lunch when Martin had left and Draco had told them he was due at the Ministry for a private conference with the Minister. Relieved, Hermione had waited until Draco had left to quietly let Pansy know that she could have the evening off.

“But—” Pansy had said, looking lost, “My Lord instructed me to watch over you and Lucio until he returns.”

“I will reckon with him if he’s angry when he returns,” Hermione had said, willing confidence into her tone. “I won’t let him punish you. I *must* speak privately with my son.”

Pansy had frowned, sensing something was amiss. She had missed most of what had happened that morning, having been so deeply asleep that she had missed her regular waking hour and had missed Lucio’s as well. She had woken in a start, dazed, sitting up in the nursery only to find that the afternoon light filled it and that Hermione was not where she had been when she’d fallen asleep.

Fear had jolted her off the bed, rushing over to Lucio to make sure he was there, and Gods forgive her for even thinking it, but she checked his pulse, too, and found it regular. She’d breathed a sigh of relief, and jumped, turning to the door when she heard Draco’s voice coming from it.

He had been leaning against the doorframe, watching. At once she realized she had overslept because of him—and he must have enchanted his own son, as well. Her panic fled at once.

“Everything’s alright now,” he’d said, and though he hadn’t smiled, she could sense satisfaction in every mote of his being. “Hermione and I have resolved our dispute.”

Pansy’s thoughts raced to Hermione the night before, bleeding heavily and covered in Draco’s blood as well. Had he kept them asleep to take her away again?

“I’m glad to hear it,” she replied cautiously.

Did you really? Or did you hurt her until you got your way again?

As soon as it had registered, she mentally tossed it away. It was not the first rebellious, hateful thought she’d had against her Master. Many had preceded it—the first had appeared upon her traumatic first meeting with Hermione the day she had been hired.

You kept me from her, came another dangerous thought. *You wanted to hurt her further and she was afraid for her life and you kept me from her.*

More of these thoughts would accumulate over time, she knew that. It was impossible for anyone with a conscience to not have them when working for a man like him—but if she wanted to keep her job and her life, none of them would ever be uttered aloud.

Even if I wanted to quit, she thought, her spine stiff with dread, *I highly doubt he’d let me. Either death or entrapment in this awful place would follow. I know too much.*

Not that she was likely to leave anyhow—with circumstances against her (*What have I done?*) she also couldn't bear the thought of leaving Hermione and Lucio.

So much for not forming attachments.

Her Master had nodded.

"She's upstairs with me," he'd said, and as if he sensed her doubt, his eyes went cold. "Lunch will be served soon. We'll expect the both of you there."

"Yes, my Lord," Pansy had said automatically, and he'd left.

She had hardly had a chance to speak privately to Hermione all day—she had hoped that after Draco had gone to the Ministry that they might speak and Pansy could learn what horrors, if any, she and Lucio had missed that morning. But Hermione had insisted on speaking with her son and so Pansy let them go outside for their little picnic. They'd just had lunch so she had sent them off with juice and some snacks, and watched them go with worry pressing at her heart.

Hermione had sensed her anxiety and had hugged her before she'd set off. Lucio had been too happy to leave the manor—Pansy thought about what he had seen the previous night and how it was probably affecting him already. Had Draco not kept them both asleep for half the day she might have helped him. She found herself wondering if she would receive an order from him to erase the memory from his son's mind... but what she had learnt last night was that he had wanted Lucio to see it.

Disgust crawled down her arms, raising the fine hairs there.

Gods help us.

"Mummy, why don't you get any post?" Lucio asked. He had gathered a handful of smooth pebbles in his hand and was mixing them around in his palm with the other.

"I don't write any letters," she said simply. Easier than saying all her friends were dead, and her family had no memory of her, and that any letters she *did* write would probably be heavily censored by her husband, if not outright destroyed.

"Why not?"

Hermione shrugged. "I have nothing to write about, my love. The only one I'd write letters to is you, and you're here with me." She stroked his cheek and he pulled away, distracted in trying to find the smoothest pebble within the mass in his hand. She pulled hers back and hesitated.

"What did you see last night, Lucio? When you saw your father and I."

Lucio kept staring at his palm.

"You are not in trouble," she added.

Lucio looked like he might cry.

“Daddy was hurting you,” he said quietly. “I heard screaming. I was scared.” He wiped a tear from his cheek with a grubby fist and Hermione, feeling her heart tear, reached out and hauled him to her, cradling him in her lap.

“I’m so sorry, my love,” she said brokenly. “You should never have seen that. Never, never.”

She pressed Lucio’s curly little head into her chest, feeling his thin little arms wrap around her.

“What was daddy doing?”

Hermione didn’t dare go into specifics.

“Does he frighten you, Lucio?”

“Will daddy hurt me, too?”

“No,” Hermione said sharply. “I’ll never let him hurt you.”

She wiped at his eyes and let out a long sigh.

“Has your father told you the story of how he and I met?”

Lucio nodded.

The wind danced in the trees around them. Branches swayed protectively around them.

“What did he tell you?”

Lucio tried to remember.

“He said you were friends.”

Hermione stroked his hair.

“We were never friends. I want you to know that. I never liked your father at school.”

Lucio frowned, confused.

“Was he bad?”

“Yes. He was a bully and he did awful things to my friends and I.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” she said. ‘But we fought a lot and he hurt me then, too.’ She closed her eyes, still stroking his curls. “He liked me but I didn’t like him. He said he would marry me and I told him no, I didn’t want that.”

Lucio was still frowning. “But you’re married now.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “When we were still in school, he did something terrible and left. He went into hiding.”

“What did he do?” When she didn’t reply right away, he peered up at her and shook her arm. “What was it, mummy?”

Hermione looked at him sadly.

I'd keep you from knowing this your entire life, if you could, so you wouldn't know this shadow that always hangs overhead. But Draco is right. You need to know. Even if you'll see me differently because of it. If you have to know, you'll know through me, and not your father.

"He killed someone."

Lucio's frown deepened, and he said nothing, looking down at the forest floor as her words registered and he processed the news. Would he refuse to believe it? She couldn't tell. All she could do was continue.

"Your father was working for Voldemort, who was an evil wizard who wanted to kill someone very important to me. Voldemort was very powerful and wanted to kill the Headmaster of my school, but couldn't get inside, so he had your father do it. And he did, and he left school and I didn't see him for a long time."

"I want you to know your father has never been a good man," she said. "We've known each other since we were very young, and he has always been cruel and wicked and selfish. I know this might be a lot for you to hear right now. I know you love your father. But you need to know the truth, even if it pains me to do it. Your father knew I did not love him and he made me marry him. He kept me from my family and has killed many of my friends. What you saw last night was not the first time he has hurt me and it will not be the last. I have been his prisoner for a very long time."

"Is that why you can't use magic?" Lucio asked suddenly. "I never see you use magic, mummy, but you're a witch."

"I am. Your father will not let me use magic, because if I could, I would run away."

But I would kill him first. At least, I could have, before the Horcrux.

"I want you to know," she started, blinking quickly, her voice cracking. "I want you to know that I may not love your father but I do what is necessary to keep you and me safe. I love you more than *anything* in the world, and I will protect you from any threat at any cost, and that includes your father."

She was in Draco's arms again that night in bed. He stroked her belly gently. His other hand held hers just over her sternum.

"How did he take it, then?" Draco said.

Of course he knew. Hermione sighed.

"He's been very quiet since. It will take him time to process it."

"Do you feel better now that he knows?"

"No. He's too young for that sort of talk."

Draco's lips smoothed over her forehead. "The longer we'd have waited, the more resentment we might have risked from him, love."

When she didn't reply, he slid down onto his back, supported his head with his arm and pillow, and rolled her on top of him. Hermione laid her head into her crossed arms over his chest. His other arm rested possessively on the small of her back. Hermione closed her eyes and tried to sleep, but the steady beat of his heart irritated her. All she could think of was Lucio, how silent and pensive he had been as they had walked back into the manor, how he had dutifully gone to Pansy after she had kissed him good night.

We'll see how he fares in the morning.

"Have you tried using it again?" Draco asked suddenly.

Hermione blinked. His hand left her back to take her hand in his, his finger delicately tracing the edges of her ring.

"No."

At that, he looked minutely surprised. "Why not?"

"I don't know—I think I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"That I was only able to use it once."

He brought her hand to his mouth, kissed it.

"Why should you be afraid?" He asked. "You used it earlier today and didn't even realize it."

She frowned. "What?"

"You made me bleed, sweetheart," he said. "This morning. You dug your little claws into my chest and made me bleed, and didn't notice. I only let you do that during sex."

She thought back and remembered it, wondered how she hadn't known as it had happened. Draco smiled gently.

"Try it," he said. "Show me your claws again."

Hermione brought up her free hand, concentrating. It was taking more effort—last night it had felt almost effortless. Had the crack within her sealed back up again? She closed her eyes, reaching within. She felt the fissure—it had closed up, but she sensed that with enough force she could break it open again, perhaps even widen it. Her magic waited on the other side, attempting to reach back out to her.

Gritting her teeth, she tried again and felt her hand tingle with the start of a transformation. This time, she would attempt the full thing, not just one.

When she opened her eyes, her head was swimming, and she felt weaker than before, but she saw with a lurch of excitement in her stomach that she had succeeded.

Draco stared at her talons, transfixed.

"I've read accounts of magic being unleashed unconsciously during episodes of extreme emotion," he said, studying her scaly wrist and her taloned fingers, fascination heavy in his gaze. "Cases usually are reported in children, who haven't learned to control their magic yet. I

thought my ring was foolproof—I never considered this outcome—I should have suspected it might happen with you, considering everything I’ve put you through. There were signs…”

Hermione went quiet, thinking hard.

“The first time I tried to kill myself. The doors to the balcony were locked.”

“Always.”

“You were asleep—I was terrified you’d wake up any second and find me gone. I almost lost control—when the doors opened, I barely questioned it. I went through and jumped.”

His eyes tightened a fraction at the memory of lurching awake, urgency howling in his veins, his ring tugging him to Apparate beneath the balcony and he’d done so without wondering why until he’d seen her figure hurtling down. He reacted on instinct—the scream that had left him, he wasn’t aware of. He’d loosed magic to slow her descent and had caught her. His knees had buckled and he’d sank to the ground in relief, in confusion as to what and how it had happened. How had he not felt her creep away? How had she got past his lock? There had still been blood between her legs—how had she even managed to walk? The only thing that mattered was that she was still alive.

He had wondered about the lock sparingly since, simply thinking she had found a muggle way to thwart him, as she’d done before, or that their house-elf at the time had helped her.

But it had been her all along.

“I thought I could restrain you. I was a fool.”

At this, Hermione smiled wryly. “I’ve told you as much.”

He chuckled, and with a sudden burst of movement, rolled over, flipping their positions so she was underneath now, almost breathless with his weight laying on her. He kissed her deeply, holding her face in his hands.

“I’ve been too proud and arrogant to listen, I suppose,” he said when they broke apart. “But I’m listening now.”

He kissed her again, stealing her breath until she managed to wrench away.

Power simmered inside her—strong, but not as strong as it could be. Part of her was missing, and it had been long enough. Panting, Hermione gripped his chin in one hand, her talons barely digging into his flesh. Their eyes locked on to each other.

“Then I expect you to obey,” she said, almost snarling. “Give me back my magic, husband.”

His eyes glazed.

“You’ve got me weak in the knees, firebird,” he said, smiling wickedly. “You ask so sweetly.”

He took hold of her hand. His fingers found her ring, and with no effort at all, pulled it off her finger.

12. The Awakening

Stay safe, everybody. Have another chapter to tide you over until the next. 3

The fracture deep inside her turned into a crevice. Pressure stacked. Mounted. She felt when it crumbled and formed a ravine. Like water in a dam that had been torn down, magic burst forth.

Hermione bit back her gasp and arched off the bed, pressing herself against Draco unintentionally as it seared her from within, flaring up every nerve inside her body. He was gripping her arms tightly. She squeezed her eyes shut. Tears rolled from her eyes.

Her whole head felt malleable, tender, like an overripe grape about to burst. A high pitched whine filled her ears and she cringed in pain as it barreled through her head. Suddenly the room, which was already dim, was too bright even through her closed eyelids. The fine hairs along her body stood on end, her limbs stiffened as if frozen, her mouth grimaced.

“What is it?” Draco was asking. “How do you feel?”

“It’s too much,” she gasped, arching into him again as the magic thrashed inside her, as if seeking escape. “Oh, *gods*.”

Her blood roared in her ears. Her heart raced—she pictured Harry on his Firebolt, speeding through the sky. She felt Draco’s hand on her heart, the other on her lower abdomen pressing her down, as if he thought she might levitate off the bed.

The sensation of her magic being released was so strong she was extremely sensitive to anything else and she groaned and thrashed in her panic, trying to rip away from Draco’s grip. He pressed down on her more tightly and lay his full weight on top of her, supported himself on his elbows, watching her, a strange gleam of fascination in his eyes as his wife burned.

Her face was turning darker. She was drawn so tightly he feared the magic might snap her into pieces. His heart pounded.

For the first time he wondered whether it had been a dangerous mistake to lock it up inside her for so long.

It’s tearing her apart.

The realization sunk his heart with horror.

“Breathe, sweetheart,” he urged. “*Breathe*. Don’t fight it.”

There was a loud CRACK and he thought Toffee had Apparated into the room and he turned to shout for it to leave or kill it for interrupting, but there was another, longer CRACK right after coming from his left, and he found the source was the stained glass window.

Hermione writhed underneath him, a long, hoarse groan coming from deep inside her. Her whole body was taut and straining as if the strength of the magic inside her was too great for the limits of her body—he sensed it roiling inside her like murderous waves in the fury of a storm. The longer it went on, the more cracks appeared in the window. Draco’s stare went from her to the window, frowning.

She was so hot, like she was running a high fever. Draco cupped her cheek, shaking.

“Breathe, Hermione!”

Her eyes flew open; she let out a huge gasp for breath and the window finally exploded. They were showered in shards of glass and the first wave of cold night air—Draco covered Hermione with his body, feeling the glass skitter across his skin, but no pain.

She barely noticed it, only having energy enough to focus on her burning body and Draco’s weight, which was strangely comforting amidst the true wakening of her magic. She felt herself shutting down and gripped Draco in fear with the last reserves of her strength, her eyes pleading for his help although she saw the fear in his eyes that for once, even he didn’t know what was happening, and therefore could not save her.

Why was this happening? She should be feeling stronger, not weaker. Fear wrapped around her throat—she tried to speak but nothing but a pained moan came out. Pain coursed through her as her magic continued to rush feverishly back into her.

I didn’t think it would be like this, was her final thought.

“Hermione, what’s wrong?” he was asking. “What’s happening?”

His voice was so distant. Her vision was fading out. Her hands fell from his arms.

Draco pulled back slightly, feeling pieces of glass slide off his back. He stared at her in disbelief. He jerked his head and the shards on the bed vanished.

Her eyes had closed again. Her jaw was clenched so tightly he feared she’d shatter her own teeth, too. He felt her forehead. She was high with fever after all. He brushed at the sweat beading on her forehead, grateful for the broken window and the night breeze, that it would help alleviate her temperature.

“Sweetheart, can you hear me?”

She didn’t respond, her shivering fading into an eerie stillness. He gripped her harder, as if that could retain her life force.

No.

It wasn’t supposed to go this way.

Alarmed, Draco checked her pulse and on finding that it was still running too quick, he lifted an eyelid with the pad of his thumb carefully. It was fevered, unfocused.

“Little bird. *Hermione*. If you can hear me, say something.”

She didn’t respond.

Draco swore, dread gripping him with cold fingers.

Her ring lay discarded beside him but he could sense it, briefly wondering if restoring it to her finger would set everything to rights, but inside he knew with certainty that this change was irrevocable.

This is my own doing.

Her words from the night before resurfaced, in a gloating tone this time.

‘I’ve told you as much.’

Fool. You arrogant, arrogant fool. Were she awake now, he could picture the exact curl of her lip, the way her eyes would harden with disdain as she’d say those exact words.

Draco grit his teeth, willing that image away. He took her hand in his.

“Squeeze my hand if you can hear me.”

He waited for her to do it and when she didn’t so much as twitch a finger he squeezed her wrist, leaning in to speak into her ear, rage simmering inside him. Her hand was totally limp.

What had he done? His pulse had slowed to a sickly beat. Hers raced on.

“If this is some sort of joke, I’m going to take that magic back and you’ll never get a taste of it again. I’ll bruise that beautiful arse of yours until you can’t sit for a week.”

Nothing.

His grip around her wrist tightened in fear and anger—he felt something *crunch* inside that could be nothing else but bones breaking. She didn’t so much as flinch. Draco swore and released her wrist gently. He forgot his own strength, sometimes.

The room began to spin around him. He felt dazed. She appeared catatonic but he could feel her magic still raging inside her, he could see her chest rise as she breathed—shallowly, but she at least still *breathed*.

He turned his head to the door.

“Pansy,” he barked.

She was there at once, Apparating in silently, her hands folded before her as she bowed.

“Yes, My Lord?”

She straightened and saw the scene: the gaping, broken window and her Master nude and crouched protectively over Hermione on his bed. She couldn’t see Hermione’s eyes but her face was quite pale and she wasn’t moving. Draco’s eyes were wild. She felt her face drain of color. Her stomach lurched violently.

He finally killed her.

Grief and judgment flickered across her face too quickly for her to mask it—Draco saw it, and she knew it. She found herself recoiling as if expecting him to strike her down too, but he did nothing. She waited tensely.

“What’s happened?” She heard herself asking, abandoning all protocol in her shock. She approached the bed quickly—Draco moved so as to hide Hermione from her view, cradling

her head against his chest, supporting her back with his hand. Hermione's hands hung limp—one at an odd angle.

Pansy stopped warily. He was almost feral.

"Call for the Healer," Draco said, and his voice was hoarse in a way she had never heard before—was that *fear*?

She stared.

"Now."

Pansy cast another worried look at Hermione and left at once.

There was no getting past Draco when he was like this. If there was even a slim chance that Hermione was alive, it was best to do as he said. She prayed silently that Hermione had merely passed out as she wiped at her eyes.

She was glad Lucio was well asleep by now. No need for him to see this, too. It hurt to think about. But she had locked the nursery doors after putting him to bed so what had happened merely one night ago would not happen again.

She sent a cryptic Patronus to Draco's trusted Healer and then went down to the foyer to await his arrival. He had visited them countless times during her employment, but he only remembered about a third of those visits. Draco made sure of that, as most of his visits were of a highly-sensitive nature and involved the care of the Lady of the Manor. Healer Lewis was the best Healer gold could buy and worked almost exclusively for Draco, as he saw to it that Healer Lewis was *very* well paid for his secrecy—not that secrecy was much of an issue. Draco paid him a generous sum to keep him from needing to take on any other patients, that they would not take up his time should he be needed at the Malfoy Manor, and so others might not dare pry into what business did not belong to them. Not that he would be able to divulge anything truly sensitive, as where he had not been Obliviated, his very survival depended on his secrecy. Draco had taken every possible precaution.

Draco always Obliviated him or modified his memory after most visits. Whether they had agreed to this method beforehand in some sort of contract or not was unknown to Pansy but she had her doubts. Either the Healer had no qualms to his easy wealth, or Draco had Imperiused him, or he truly did not know the insidious conditions under which he was employed. Draco had only told her how to take action in case he was needed and that was that. The rest, she had learned later in bits and pieces.

Pansy's Patronus, a silvery cat, returned from thin air and wisped around her legs before disappearing. Pansy held her robe tighter around herself, waiting for the knock at the door that would inevitably come.

Her Patronus's message had consisted of one word: *Dove*.

Draco had taught it to her on her first day of employment at the Manor.

"Healer Lewis and I have an understanding," he'd said then. They had been in the library, just after she had first encountered Hermione in that awful manner and healed her. After she had left Hermione, Draco had immediately summoned Pansy to the library to go over the rest of the terms of her servitude. By then she had realized that him calling her to find Hermione

in such a state had been a test, and though she had passed it, a seed of doubt and regret had bloomed into sprouting within her, and she was now wondering just what she had got herself into so foolishly, without asking more questions before taking the Vow. He had not told her anything about his wife except that she was to wait on her. Pansy had not known that Hermione Granger was *clearly* his unwilling wife until she had seen that for herself in the most brutal of ways. She had merely assumed...

I should have known. I didn't know Granger well in school but I knew her well enough to know nothing could have convinced her to marry Draco. And I knew he was a monster since we were children. I didn't think he'd ever fancied her, though-maybe that's why I doubted Longbottom.

"An understanding, my Lord?" She'd asked.

He had looked out the nearest window, at the huge cage filled with birds in the garden.

"A code, really. For regular home calls and non-urgent visits, just summon him in the usual manner with your Patronus. He'll know your Patronus and that you work for me. When it's urgent and possibly life-threatening, send him the word 'dove' and he'll know he must come at once."

Pansy had used that codeword many times over since. It wasn't her code to tamper with, but it made her skin crawl to go along with Draco's obsession with likening Hermione to a bird—something so tiny and stupid and fragile. It had sat wrong with her then and still did, every time she heard him utter his favorite pet name for her or one of its many variations.

But here was another thing she could never say aloud so she had swallowed those words and seeing the silent resentment sitting in Hermione's clenched jaw every time he said it to her was validation enough that she was not the only one who felt its perverseness.

As Healer Lewis's knock sounded at the door and she rushed forward to let him in, an ominous thought struck her.

If he's mad now, how much worse would he get if he actually loses her?

Erik smiled at her thinly in greeting.

"How bad is it this time?" he asked in a low voice.

"I can't say," she whispered. "He wouldn't let me see her."

Erik nodded, a grim set to his lips.

"Poor thing."

She took his cloak and hung it by the door, then led him to the master bedroom.

"Please do everything you can for her," she said, her voice shaking, before he entered the room.

Erik paused. "A day will come when he kills her at last if he hasn't tonight, and modern medicine still crumples before death."

Pansy nodded in resigned acceptance, all too aware of this truth.

Erik entered the room and Pansy closed the door behind him, stationed herself outside the door, aching with the desire to go tend to her close friend.

What did he do to you now?

The Manor was dead silent around her. Had they been fighting again? Hermione had not called for her—but it wasn't the first time Draco would have kept her from doing it.

Pansy wiped at her eyes again.

By the time Healer Lewis had arrived Draco had managed to compose himself a little and had dressed himself and his wife, as they had both been nude during the whole ordeal. Normally he wouldn't have cared about their state of undress but he didn't care to have the Healer getting a good look at his wife unless the examination absolutely called for it.

Still, he watched intensely from beside the bed as Erik bent over Hermione on the other side, taking her temperature while his other hand was on her chest, measuring her pulse.

"Mrs. Malfoy, if you can hear me, please respond in whatever way you can," he was saying. After a moment's patience, nothing happened.

"I've tried several times to get her to respond," he said. "Nothing has worked."

The Healer was testing her hand now, the non-broken one, and tried bending her fingers but they were rigid. He attempted the other and finally noticed its condition. The bruises from Draco's grip had surfaced by now—he said nothing and examined it to make sure the set was right, then healed it quickly. He did the same examination on her legs, attempting to bend them at the knee but her body was curiously too stiff. He muttered a long incantation and then scanned her body over with his wand. When finished, he paused, frowning, staring at her prone form on the bed.

"Tell me," Draco said.

"I've never seen anything like this, my Lord," Erik replied, shaking his head. "I've had my fair share of patients who have fallen into these states, but never was it induced by their own magic unless it was a misdirected curse or a bad fall, an assault, things like that. How long has she been in this state?"

"About ten minutes," Draco answered. 'I summoned you immediately when it became clear she would not wake.' He hesitated. "You do not know what's wrong, then."

"Her pulse is indeed unusual. Her fever is high, but not the worst I have seen—it's for the best she is asleep, that may help it pass more quickly." He removed his spectacles and rubbed at his forehead. "How did this come about, my Lord?"

"You're aware of the nature of our marriage," Draco began, and the Healer nodded. "You know I kept her restrained in more ways than one."

"You're speaking of her magic, then."

"From the day we married she has not had access to her magic," Draco said, looking down to his wife, reaching over to smooth her curls from her face softly. "I kept it locked inside her

where she couldn't reach it no matter how hard she tried. She's been able to influence things, for lack of a better word, without consciously using magic. It's happened on very few occasions. Recently she was able to access a small fraction of it without my permission—we fought, and she was suddenly using magic. It lasted a very short time.”

“May I ask what happened?”

“You may not,” Draco said. He had her ring in his palm. His fingers traced over it.

“So this was another unconscious manifestation, then?”

“No. I let down the barrier that kept her magic from her tonight. I gave her full access to her power.” Draco paused, ruminating. “It has been nearly a decade that I leashed her magic. I think its strength has somehow increased, or the emotional turmoil she has been through has warped it in some way to have it affect her like this now.”

Erik was frowning. “I see.”

“What do you think?”

“You may be right, my Lord,” Erik said slowly. “I have studied cases in which magical folk have been kept from their own magic—but these cases are extremely rare. In Azkaban, one's powers are only dulled through the wards embedded into the prison so that they still have it, but it affects nothing. In the case of a child who cannot control it, it will manifest powerfully during emotional outbursts. I have never heard of a case that has lasted for several years under these conditions. It could be that her power has grown, but I would hesitate to make that claim considering there is no research on that to convincingly explain it. It is more likely that her body has become accustomed to operating without magic, and has shut down in a sort of shock at having it all back so suddenly.”

“She is Muggleborn,” Draco said, frowning. “She lived her early childhood without using magic. When she learned how to use it, there was no shock. I wonder why now it affects her so.”

“Even as a child, she must have unconsciously used it in some manner,” Erik said. “But having no access to it for many years after having it be so integral to her life for much of her adolescence is quite different. How many times are you aware of that it manifested without her knowing while you have been married?”

“Two that I know of, and I only witnessed one of them.”

“Then it's possible this may have been happening during the entirety of the marriage. But we cannot know for certain until she wakes. I'm more likely to think her current state has been caused by shock at having that barrier taken down—if there were high emotions between the two of you before you freed her magic, that may also be at play here.”

“We were mostly calm,” Draco replied slowly, thinking back to the events of only a half-hour before. “But her anger never sleeps. It is like a living thing inside of her. I wonder if that has affected her magic at all... tainted it, somehow.”

The Healer appeared intrigued. “My Lord, there is a great opportunity here to conduct valuable research—”

“No,” Draco said at once. “My wife will remain untouched.”

Erik bowed his head quickly. "Of course, my Lord."

"How long do you think she will remain in this state?"

"I cannot say, my Lord. I'm sorry to say it. It could be days. A week. Perhaps longer. With no previous research to guide me I'm afraid I am at a loss on what to do."

Draco's disappointment was palpable. He stared at Hermione.

I'm sorry, sweetling.

"First we must wait for her fever to break. I gave her a Fever-Reducer potion from my kit but it had no effect—I fear regular maladies may not help us here. We must wait for this to end on its own."

What he left unsaid hung heavily in the air around them.

If it doesn't kill her, first.

"Thank you, Lewis," Draco said. "I will keep close watch over her, and send you information as this progresses. I'll summon you when she wakes."

Lewis grabbed his satchel and bowed. "Of course, my Lord. I am at your service."

Draco motioned to the door. "Pansy will see you out."

When the door had closed behind the Healer, Draco remained standing and staring at his wife for several seconds, waiting for her to wake suddenly and laugh at him for falling for her joke.

But one thing he had learned in their marriage was that Hermione had little taste for jokes. Or if she had, she never shared it with him.

That, or I squashed it out of her years ago.

He took a step and heard a crunch, and looked down to see himself standing in a small circle of red-stained carpet.

The glass. He hadn't cleared the rest of the mess away and had been standing in the damned stuff and bleeding all this time.

He hadn't felt a thing.

The night breeze had died down and all he could hear was the crickets outside, the rushing of water from the nearby pond.

Draco snapped his fingers and the glass was gone. He snapped again and the window was completely restored. How had she broken it through the wards that were always on it? Even with her magic restored, it should have been impossible.

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in."

Pansy entered carefully.

“She’s alive,” he said and saw the tension bleed from her posture in relief. It touched him to see how deeply she cared for Hermione. And oddly, it felt good to share that relief with someone else.

Monster am I, darling? He thought toward Hermione. *How shocked you’d be if you could see me now.*

“May I ask what happened, my Lord?”

“I gave her her magic back. And you see the result.”

Pansy approached the bed, saw Hermione, still appearing to be in a cursed sleep.

“Lucio won’t know about this,” he said. “I don’t know when she’ll wake.”

If she’ll wake.

She nodded, her expression pinched with worry.

“What shall I tell him?”

“Tell him she had to go on an emergency visit to see someone,” he said.

Pansy’s expression faltered in surprise. “Who?”

“Anyone, I don’t care. Make someone up. Tell them she might be gone for a while.” He looked away.

“Will you be needing anything else, my Lord?”

“Coffee,” he said, surprising himself. “Make me a pot of coffee, the strongest we have.”

Pansy left at once and he sat on the armchair by the fireplace, having moved it to face the bed where his wife lay, alive and unresponsive.

I won’t sleep until you come back to me.

His watch lasted two weeks.

13. Return

THANK YOU for being so patient and lovely with your reviews! You're all the best. There's nothing I love more than reading your reactions to each new chapter and it helps fuel me to get back to writing faster.

There's been a lot of discussion and theories on the events of the last chapter and I wanted to make some things clear before we dive back in.

Draco's remorse here isn't a genuine sort of remorse. He's only annoyed that his own actions took Hermione away from him, and is angry with himself than anything, thinking that he should have just kept the ring on to avoid all this trouble. He's mostly mad that he's lost access to Hermione, like a child who can't play with their favorite toy anymore because their parent took it away for misbehaving, and they know it was their own fault. The only way he truly would have been sorry would have been if Hermione had actually died.

I was so focused on writing all this content between Hermione and Draco that I'll confess that I totally forgot about George. Oops! It'll be explained away later. Thanks to those who pointed it out.

You're all right about the remorse and Horcrux situation, but even if Draco's remorse was genuine, Hermione wouldn't be able to take advantage of it because she's not conscious. Her Horcrux isn't complete yet, keep that in mind.

Also, if you're so inclined, I have a Ko-fi for my written works that I'm trying to be more active on. You can find me there at [thewanderingdaughter](#). I've been really bad about updating it but lately, I've been working on some artwork to add on there. Come by and take a look!

Lots going on in this chapter. Stay focused. Thanks for reading and please let me know what you think and leave a review!

When it was nine in the morning Draco finally stood from the armchair, scrubbing at his face. He stretched. Sunlight peeked in from between the crack between the drapes on the windows, searching across the walls of the bedroom and creeping across the floor, reaching toward the bed.

Draco looked at his wife, his face blank. She hadn't moved once in the entire night.

There was a knock at the door. He motioned a finger and it opened. Pansy stepped through, looking first at the bed then at him, a silent question curling in the air between them.

He shook his head.

She nodded tightly and clasped her hands at her front.

"Lucio is awake and is having breakfast, my Lord. Will you come down and join him?"

Draco was still. "Did you follow my order?"

"Yes, my Lord." She looked at the bed again. "He was upset she did not say goodbye before she left."

Draco's eyes hadn't left the bed. He had been thinking back to the last words his wife had spoken.

"Is he at breakfast?" he asked after that pause.

It was clear he had not been listening. Pansy resisted a frown.

"Yes, my Lord."

"Send word to his tutors they won't be needed for today. Take Lucio to Diagon Alley," Draco said as he stood and went to the water basin on the dresser, splashed his face with cold water and braced his arms on the dresser, ignoring his reflection in the mirror. He tapped once on the space beside the basin and a heavy pouch materialized there. He motioned for her to take it. She stepped forward and took it. It was heavy with coin.

"Spend the day with him," Draco said. "Buy him anything he wants. If he asks about his mother, lie. We don't know how long this will last."

Pansy looked back to the bed. "My Lord, did you sleep at all last night?"

"No."

"Then perhaps Lucio and I can go out another day and I'll look over him and my Lady here so you may rest."

He had been in the process of magically changing into fresh clothes.

"No," he said coldly, fixing his lapels. "I want no distractions. I will not sleep, and *I* will watch over her."

"What about Weasley, my Lord?" She asked. "I have not seen him since the day of the ceremony."

"He isn't here," Draco said dismissively. "He's leading the group looking for Longbottom's grandmother."

Oh. How hadn't she noticed?

Well, the past few days had been very eventful, for one. And Weasley wasn't quite the social creature he used to be. Since his arrival at the Manor he spent much of his time in his room or outside the Manor unless the Dark Lord required his presence.

"Forgive me, my Lord," Pansy said. "I meant no impertinence."

"Then go and do as you're told," he said. "I'll send two men to shadow the two of you in case of any trouble."

He noticed her expression of displeasure and ignored it. Pansy was well capable of taking care of herself, but with Longbottom sniffing around constantly and then Hermione in her current state, he would take no more losses.

“You’ll both go in disguise as well,” he said. “The wards will take care of that.”

“Will that be all, my Lord?”

“I’ll expect you both back before dinner.”

“Of course.” She took her leave.

The door shut and Draco stared at Hermione on the bed. He’d had plans at the Ministry today but those would have to be postponed now. He would not leave Hermione but for an emergency.

She looked cold, alone there. Her stomach rose and fell steadily with each deep breath she took.

Draco went to the windows and pulled the drapes open, filling the room with sunlight. It streamed thickly into the room. The multi-colored light from the stained-glass window tinted her form on the bed like a glaze of paint. She looked like a cursed princess, waiting the kiss of her prince.

He let out a brittle laugh at that.

I kept you from the sun for a long time when I first got you, do you remember that, little bird? He thought to her. You missed it so badly I kept finding you at the windows, trying to tear the drapes down. Even when you slept at the stained window, I’d find your fingers all curled and scratching at the glass. It didn’t do anything then, but maybe you weakened it little by little that way, and you didn’t even realize it.

He remembered the day he had found her in his office, pushing his papers off his desk in anger after realizing he had charmed them to hide their contents from her eyes. He had trapped her between himself and the desk, and at seeing her unhealthy pallor had given in and uncovered the windows. He knew how much she hated being in his arms, but the moment that sunlight had touched her she had melted, closing her eyes as if she had been suddenly held by another and more preferred lover.

The jealousy that had torn into his heart spurred him into clearing the rest of the desk and claiming her right then and there despite her protests.

I couldn’t bear to share you with the sun.

Her ring was on the bedside table. It glinted brightly in the light.

I never should have taken it off you.

He approached the bed rapidly and settled himself in beside her, his arms wrapping around her. She was still stiff and damp with sweat, her skin still hot to the touch. She didn’t so much as flicker an eyelid as he cradled her head into his chest.

He felt her pulse thrumming in her throat, nuzzled his nose along that lovely soft column, pressing soft kisses here and there.

“Fight it, sweetheart,” he murmured. “Fight it off and wake up. I won’t let you leave me this way. Any way.”

“Did father hurt mummy again?”

Pansy stopped in her tracks, nearly fumbling the spoon she’d been about to hand to Lucio as they walked out of Florian Fortescue’s.

“No,” she said simply.

It was her own magic this time. But that was a very complicated answer, and he would surely ask for clarification, and she didn’t know enough to explain anyhow even if Draco had allowed her to.

It’s still his doing. If he hadn’t tampered with her magic, nothing would have happened. None of us would be in the situations we’re in right now.

“I’m scared,” Lucio said, looking down at his ice-cream cone.

And there it was. He had been brave all morning though she had known behind that sweet little face, worry lay in a tangled heap. They had gone from store to store—she had shown him some of her favorite books from when she had been his age, and they had looked over art supplies and Quidditch gear and cats and several toy stores. She had bought anything he showed even the slightest interest in, but he had not shown any strong emotion other than agreeing quickly to get a cold treat after she had heard his tummy rumble.

“It’s okay to be scared,” Pansy said, sitting down on a bench outside the shop. She patted the seat beside her but Lucio remained standing, his ice-cream dripping, his pale brow bent with pent-up tears. He sniffed.

Pansy caught eyes with Jones and Williams, who lingered casually across the street in front of a lively pub, wearing casual and nondescript robes rather than their black gilded uniform. Jones nodded upwards at her as if inquiring if something was wrong, and she shook her head. He looked away, scanning the street as other shoppers walked by.

“It’s okay to cry, too,” Pansy said. “I know you’re worried about her.”

Lucio rubbed at his eye. “Why didn’t mummy say goodbye?”

Pansy’s heart constricted.

“There was no time,” she said gently. “But you know she loves you with all her heart.”

Lucio’s ice cream had begun to melt and dribble down his cone. “Did you see her before she left?”

It would have been so easy to lie. But looking at that innocent, sad little face, Pansy couldn’t bear it.

“No, my dear, I didn’t. Now sit with me and see to that ice cream or the thestrals will gobble it up for you.”

At that, Lucio’s seriousness broke, and he giggled, looking around as if expecting to find one of the invisible creatures beside him.

“You said there aren’t any in Diagon Alley,” he said as he sat down.

“Sometimes, there are,” she said. “I saw one here when I was young. It was eating food off a vendor’s cart and they didn’t know what was happening because they didn’t know what a thestral was. They thought someone was pulling a prank.”

Lucio had finally taken up his spoon and hurriedly spooned ice-cream from the edges of his cone.

“Why aren’t they allowed?” He asked.

Pansy pointed at the thin, packed stream of people moving about in almost a straight line along the main street.

“The streets are too narrow. Can you imagine walking in that mess with a smelly thestral tail in front of you?”

Lucio giggled again.

“Father says mummy rode one, once.”

“Did she, now?” Pansy asked, wiping at a drop of ice-cream on her wrist. “I wouldn’t be surprised. She’s terribly brave.”

“Daddy also says she also rode a *Hippogriff*.” This was said in an awed tone. Pansy smiled.

“From the sound of it, you’d like to ride one, too.”

Lucio frowned, suddenly perturbed. “I don’t know what they look like.”

“How about this: let’s finish our ice creams and then we’ll go back to the bookstore and we’ll find a book on magical creatures, and I’ll show you. Does that sound alright?”

Lucio smiled widely. “Okay.”

When they returned, dinner was set and ready and waiting for them, but Draco was not there. Pansy and Lucio ate, and she did her best at keeping his spirits up but she knew he was wondering where his father was.

“He might be busy working,” she said. “Come, it’s time for bed.”

She had gone to the master bedroom after, knocked on the door.

When it opened she walked in, let her eyes adjust to the darkness of the room.

“How is she?” She asked softly, knowing he was there.

“Still the same.” His voice came from the bed.

“Well, Lucio and I are back,” she said. “He’s gone to bed now.”

“Good,” Draco said, his voice toneless. “Take him out again tomorrow. Have a long walk. Go see a show, a museum. It doesn’t matter. Keep him from the house as long as you can.”

Why? Pansy frowned.

“Did you get any rest, my Lord?”

“Some. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, my Lord,” she said.

The door shut behind her. Draco wiped away at his lips. His hand came away wet with blood, the same blood which was spreading its stain rapidly on Hermione’s pillow.

On the second day, Pansy and Lucio had spent the majority of the day out and about, though the luster of being away from the Manor so unexpectedly had polished off a bit since the day before.

When they returned just in time for dinner the table was set and the food waiting as like the day before, but Draco was not there again. Lucio’s face had been crestfallen.

Pansy went straight to the master bedroom after they had eaten and she had put him to bed. The room was dark again.

“She’s still the same,” came Draco’s voice from the bed.

“I see,” she said. She couldn’t see him but could sense rage and agitation in his tone though it was flat.

“Do the same tomorrow,” he said. She heard rustling on the bed as he shifted.

“Have you eaten, my Lord?”

He let out a huff of laughter. “That doesn’t matter.”

“Your son needs you,” she said. “I must speak bluntly, my Lord. You can’t keep pushing him out of the house thinking he’ll be fine. He’s worried for his mother. And he needs you. The less he sees you the more he thinks something is wrong.”

She heard Draco sigh. “I’ll speak with him tomorrow, then. You’ll watch Hermione for me.”

“Of course, my Lord.” She bowed and left.

The next morning, Draco had appeared at breakfast and signaled to Pansy. Lucio had stared trepidatiously at his father as he’d sat down before him. Pansy squeezed Lucio’s shoulder comfortingly and left to watch over Hermione.

“Where’s mummy?” Lucio asked.

“Visiting someone who needed her help,” father said. “It was urgent—she barely had time to say goodbye to me, too.”

That eased Lucio’s mind a little. Still, his mother’s words from just days earlier still sat heavily on his mind and he watched his father carefully.

“What is it?” Draco asked. A plate of food had materialized before him the moment he had sat down but he had not touched it let alone glanced at it.

“Mummy told me the truth,” Lucio began, suddenly frightened. “About you.”

Father sat back in his chair and smiled. “So she did. And what do you think?”

Lucio frowned, suddenly feeling very small. “I don’t know.”

“She’s right,” father said simply. “It’s all true: we were never friends at school, I did steal her, and she doesn’t love me.”

Lucio’s eyes were on his plate, his appetite gone.

“Look at me,” father said. Lucio looked up slowly and met his eyes. His voice was so cold. Everything felt so different. Shaken, his hands clenched the table.

“Do you love mummy?”

“I do. I love her so much that I stole her from her friends and family and kept her for myself, and I kept her from using her magic to protect her.”

Lucio struggled to make sense of this.

“Why?”

“Some other fool would have stolen her away if I didn’t do it first.” Father drove his index finger into the table. “This is what I meant when I said to you a few months ago that you must learn to take what you want. If you leave things to chance you will be disappointed and run the risk of losing. Your mother loved somebody else and would have married him. I couldn’t let that happen. I wanted your mother so I took her and I don’t regret it, and I never will.”

“Mummy loved someone else?”

Father’s mouth twisted in a smile. “Yes. But I knew she was better off with me than him. Think of it: if I hadn’t married her, you wouldn’t be here now.”

The dining room was utterly silent around them. Lucio wished Pansy was there with him.

Lucio frowned again. “She said you hurt her a lot.”

“I do,” father acknowledged gravely. “But you needn’t worry about that. She made a promise to stay, and she’ll keep it. She made that promise knowing what it meant for herself.”

“Don’t hurt mummy,” Lucio said, and it pleased Draco to see that he was angry. “Leave her alone. She’s scared of you.”

“Watch your tone,” Draco said coolly. “Finish your breakfast.”

Lucio glared at his father for the first time he could ever remember. Hate was a new feeling. It almost scared him just how angry he was. But father’s stare was just as frightening, and he was afraid of what would happen if he didn’t obey, so he picked up his fork and woodenly ate another scrap of egg.

“I forbid you from intervening in what happens between your mother and I,” father said. “I would rather you know the truth and hate me than be ignorant all your life. I’ll not have you so when you are older and out in the world. Your mother may have told you I have always been cruel. She’s right. But she is my wife and you are my son and I will always protect and care for you both, but I will not have *you* attempt to place yourself into what is not your

business. Your mother may not like being mine but she has made her choice and her choice was to stay with me. You may not understand it now but you will in time. I will never harm you so you need not fear me, but I will not have you disrespecting me, either. Understood?"

Lucio looked down at his plate, crying and afraid, hate twining around them both within him.

Father's voice was sharper now. "*Look at me and don't cry.* Do you understand?"

Lucio looked up, rubbing at his eye. He missed mummy more than ever. "Yes, father."

"Good." Father stood up from his seat. "Your tutoring will resume today after breakfast. Finish your breakfast and get yourself ready. I'll see you at dinner."

He came around the table and kissed the top of Lucio's head. Lucio almost cringed.

After Pansy had gone to let in Bryson, who'd arrived for Lucio's daily lesson, Draco crawled back into the bed with Hermione.

Her condition had not changed. He sighed, frustrated, feeling her forehead and her pulse.

She breathed on evenly, displaying no awareness of his presence.

Draco leaned forward to whisper in her ear.

"If you wake up right now, I'll set you free."

She did not stir.

I didn't think so. Not that I'd have done it, anyway.

He straddled her slowly, leaning down to cup her throat in his hands.

"Wake up, wife," he said softly, kissing the hollow of her throat. Her fever-heat transferred into him, making him shiver. One hand tugged playfully at her curls.

"I miss you."

When she didn't answer he scraped his teeth gently along her throat.

His fangs slid easily into the day-old punctures they had left in her flesh. She didn't scream, flinch, or whimper as they sank farther in, and he drank.

He only took a sample this time. Not like the other night, where he'd drunk long and deep and had painted the sheets and his insides red with her life force.

It was a comfort, such a comfort, to feel her blood hot and rich in his mouth. It was thick and heady on his tongue, like velvet liquid. There was a faint, strange taste to it that was almost *stale*. He had felt that the day before, too. It had unsettled him but as long as it remained there and did not slide downwards into a fouler taste, he would remain hopeful.

He let her blood linger on his tongue like a wine to be savored, comparing it to its taste the last time he had fed from her whilst she had been alive and screaming. How much *richer* it had tasted then, like her fear and pain lacing through her had infused her blood somehow. It had had a vitality to it that was almost acrid, but delicious nonetheless.

When that taste comes back, or something apart from this stale quality arises, that's when I'll know you're better.

He couldn't wait to consume it again.

He pulled his bite gently from her flesh, his cock hard and pressing into her, his eyes glazed as he watched the dark streams of blood that oozed from the punctures. He gave the wound a slow lick, and when he pulled back the punctures had been healed.

In the ensuing days Draco and Pansy worked together to care after Hermione, who showed no sign of improvement until ten days in when her fever finally broke and her pulse returned to normal. Draco had sent for Healer Lewis again, who had conducted another wellness check that yielded no satisfactory answer. He had brought more Fever-Reducer potions and had given them to Hermione, and none had made any changes. Though Draco and Pansy had made sure Hermione was well fed (mainly through liquids, as she could not chew) and cleaned regularly and able to relieve herself she had lost a considerable amount of weight in that time due to the fever and the sweats that had ravaged her body, much to Draco's distress.

"She's wasting away," he'd said angrily. "Whatever this is, it's eating her from the inside."

Lucio had been distant and could barely meet his eye when they ate together. Gone were the days of his son looking at him with love and admiration. Draco didn't mind. Now that he didn't have to hide his true self he felt more comfortable.

Martin's next appointments had been canceled until further notice. Draco had sent him a sum of gold to cover his living expenses for the rest of the month, so he would not be lacking in anything by the time things were back to normal.

Pansy had managed to persuade him at last into getting back to business outside the Manor. He had been about ready to fire her when he realized she was right, that he was stagnating by staying by Hermione's side all day doing nothing. There were tasks to be finished, important talks to have. His followers had grown nervous at this unusual period of inactivity.

He resumed his affairs outside the Manor with a frenzied pace, and despite how normal things felt outside he could not stop reaching through his ring to sense her, and then remembering that she no longer wore it.

"A few of my men came across Longbottom near Diagon Alley the other day, my Lord," Nott had reported on the tenth day, when they had run into each other at the Ministry. There had been a photographer hovering nearby wanting to take Draco's picture—Draco gave the man a casual look and the wizard hurried off, having sensed the threat behind the glance.

They exited the Ministry and stood outside in the bustling street. A misty rain had begun to fall.

"What was he doing?"

"Buying books. Couldn't see what they were about. We caught sight of him just after he'd left the shop. Longbottom must've known my men were following him. Didn't know why he was so bold in the first place, but he must have Apparated or put on some glamours because

we followed him around a corner and he was gone. We went back and asked the shopkeep what his books were about but he's about ninety years old and says he only cares to read prices—when he can see them.”

What could Longbottom be researching now? Draco frowned.

You're not still scheming toward resurrection, are you, Longbottom? You're really that desperate?

“I think it's time your men put up anti-glamour charms around those areas,” Draco said. “I'll... *suggest* it to the Minister.”

“For the people's ‘protection’, aye, I like the sound of that.” Nott grinned. “What about when Lady Malfoy heads down there? I know you've got that land of yours warded to hell and back.”

Draco had been about to Apparate away but turned back to look at Nott with a sly smile.

“Exceptions can always be made.”

He had gone home that night, had dinner with Pansy and Lucio, and gone back into bed with Hermione. He sampled her blood in it and found no change in it since the last time.

The days continued to pass in this fashion. Either they crawled by or they sped past. Pansy felt like all she had to do was blink for it to be the next day. It was the opposite for Draco. Slowly, he lost the agitated, feral look in his eyes from the first few days. He seemed much calmer as the days passed and Pansy wondered constantly what he knew that she didn't that had turned him so *normal*, for lack of a better word, suddenly.

On the thirteenth day, Draco had come home early and changed clothes, had gone to the bed to pick up his wife, and sat her on his lap in the armchair.

He had kissed her softly, trying to rouse her, spreading his kisses to her cheeks, her neck, her breasts. Her skin was warm and smooth—he felt her bones more easily than before and was reminded again of her alarming weight loss. He'd have to plump her up a bit once she awoke.

“Come back to me,” he'd murmured, stroking her. “Sweetheart, come.”

She had not responded, her head lolling back into the armchair, her lovely throat exposed. He took the opportunity to adore it with his mouth, kissing and licking until he could wait no more and sank his fangs in again, taking in a long drink, relishing the feel of her warmth literally bleeding into him.

On that particular day her blood held a stronger taste to it—he sensed her vitals returning slowly. He moaned. His cock was hard and impatient to be buried inside her.

He pulled from her throat gently, but his fangs had got caught in her flesh somehow and tugged at it rather painfully. For the first time in thirteen days, she moved, twitching sharply in pain. Blood leaked from the wound but she didn't wake.

That was enough for Draco. He exhaled sharply, pressing his forehead to hers.

Welcome back, sweetling.

He'd had half a mind to alleviate his lust then, but it was dinner time, and his appetite called for more than just sex.

He set Hermione back down on the bed and tucked her in, and left for dinner.

On that last day of her sickness, as Pansy, Draco, and Lucio ate in total silence, Hermione dreamt, but the experience was so vivid she felt as if she had been dreaming the entire time.

The last thing she remembered was her magic coursing painfully through her and Draco's worried voice. Then darkness.

When she came to she was at the Burrow in the room she had shared with Harry once, and there was a knock at the door.

The knock had startled her into full alertness. She looked around quickly, her eyes taking in every detail, exactly as it had been the last time she had been there.

She looked down at herself, at her hands.

Am I dead or dreaming?

She was in the robe that had been on the armchair when she had been on the bed with Draco.

There was no sign of the pain. She felt whole. Good. Better than she had in some time.

But why am I back here?

The homemade rug on the floor. The books piled up in the corner, sat atop an old trunk. The faded postcards tacked onto the wall. The cot Harry had slept in, beside the bed that had once been Percy's, where she had slept. It was as if she'd stepped into the last memory she'd had of this room before she'd quit it to give herself up to Draco.

There was another knock and instantly she froze, thinking it was Draco, remembering how even the way he had knocked at the door the morning he had evaded death had seemed so cold.

Another knock came and she flinched, unable to help herself, then paused.

Her hands were on the wooden floor beneath her—she felt every grain in the wood, every scratch from years of feet and shoes and furniture wearing at it. The rug she sat on was threadbare and had lost much of its original color, and the room was warmly illuminated by the sun that currently warmed her back and hair.

Another patient knock.

This isn't real.

Her hands rubbed at the floor to reassure herself, hoping that the illusion would slide away and she'd wake up properly now.

She stood carefully, her legs wobbling beneath her. There was no remnant of the pain that had put her under, but her limbs felt stiff and ached as if she had not used them for a good while. She stretched, frowning, but the soreness remained.

At last, when the knock at the door sounded again and she could make no more excuses, she went to the door and opened it, and found Harry on the other side.

He was smiling, his green eyes bright and tearful behind his spectacles.

Somehow she was not surprised in the least to find him there.

“Did I wake you?” He asked, and just the sound of his voice after so long a withdrawal from it made her face crumple in happiness. She hadn’t realized until now that she had forgotten what he sounded like, but just in those four words, it all came flooding back as if the memory had never faded.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” she heard herself say, and then launched herself at him.

His arms wrapped around her, crushing her to him.

Why it felt so real, she wouldn’t question. She had spent *years* hoping and hoping that he would appear in a dream, that she would see him at least there one last time, had spent so many nights caught in Draco’s arms, trying to recall the face that was pressed against hers now. She found herself laughing as his glasses slid down his nose and skittered to the floor. She hadn’t even considered that this dream Harry might be intangible and that her hands might simply pass through him until she had his face in his arms and she was all at once grieving that it had been so long and intensely relieved that she had been granted one miracle.

“I miss you,” she sobbed, her hands in his hair. “So much.”

He kissed her, his hands cupping her head, joining up his kisses around her face in a constellation: from her lips to her nose, her right cheek, her left, her forehead, her eyelids.

When they finally broke apart she was breathless and they were both crying. She drank him in through her tear-irritated eyes, her heart aching so much she thought she might burst, but at the same time it was an ache of happiness, that she was finally with him.

They ended up on the floor somehow—she hadn’t even noticed when it happened but her smarting knees were evidence enough. The knelt before each other, staring, taking each other in.

Harry was as young as he had been when he had died. How must she look to him? Suddenly she felt quite self-conscious.

“You’ve always been beautiful to me,” he said, “and you still are now.”

“How did you know what I was thinking?” She asked, surprised.

“It’s a dream,” he said, shrugging. “Things tend not to make sense here.”

Their eyes met—they laughed. Her heart felt heavy.

It feels like back then.

Hermione reached out, drawing herself closer to him, and traced the lines of his face—his nose, his lips, his brows and scar, his square jaw, which she had always loved. He closed his eyes, longing and sadness set in the upwards tilt of his brows.

“I’ve missed you too,” he said, his voice breaking with grief. “You don’t know how long I’ve been trying to reach you.”

The melancholic happiness on his face increased as he took in the faint lines that pain and sadness had etched around her eyes and forehead and between her brows.

“I’m still with him,” she whispered. “The things I’ve done, Harry—” her voice broke.

He closed the gap between them, reached out for her and held her against him tightly—Hermione melted into his touch, latching on to him wherever she could.

His hands grasped hers. “You’re doing it for your own survival, Hermione.”

“For me,” she repeated, staring at the floor. “And my son.”

Harry said nothing for a moment, but there was a heaviness in his eyes when he asked, “how old?”

“He’ll be six, soon.”

“I was still alive when he was born,” Harry said, frowning. “We managed to break into that first place he’d kept you but we were too late—I was too late. All we found was one of your hairs and an unused fertility potion—I didn’t know it actually happened. How did I not know?”

“He kept the news secret for some time because he thought his enemies would try to kill our son,” Hermione said softly. “It was not my choice to have a child. He kept the conception a secret from me, too, until I recognized the symptoms.”

“I’m so sorry, Hermione.” He squeezed her hands. “Is he—?”

“No,” she said quickly. “He’s nothing like his father. He’s incredibly clever, and he’s so kind.”

“Just like you.”

She laughed, wiped at her eyes and grabbed his hand, felt his arm.

“Are you a memory? Or are you really here?”

“I think that’s for you to answer,” Harry said, and she frowned, puzzled.

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m not sure I do, either. I feel like I’ve been waiting outside that door for years, but at the same time I feel like I just woke up outside that door the same time you came in.”

Hermione shook her head. “That doesn’t make sense, this all feels so real.”

“I know,” he said, looking a little unsettled. “Everything’s the way it was before you left that night. Why are *you* here? Did he kill you?”

"No," she said, struggling to remember. "He gave me my magic back, but something went wrong. It was hurting me—I was so scared. I did think I was dying, but that wasn't his intent. He was as surprised as I was."

"He gave you your magic back?"

"We made a deal," Hermione said, unable to meet Harry's gaze. "I would join him if he gave me back my magic. He had me kill someone else to prove it. I'm a traitor."

Harry's hands wrapped around her.

"You are not a traitor," he hissed. "You're doing what you have to to make escape possible. He pushed you until you gave up—you had no other choice."

"Neville and Luna are still alive," Hermione said suddenly. "They've been raising a resistance. I saw them."

"I'm glad," Harry said. "I'm just sorry I'm not there to help them myself."

Hermione had been on the verge of adding something else when it fled her tongue and she forgot it promptly, but didn't care.

"I went back to Hogwarts," she said. "I saw your grave."

His eyes were pained. She went to him, sat astride his lap, kissed him, her hands eagerly roaming over him, need suddenly burning at her.

"I'm sorry I didn't visit it sooner."

His hands were on her bum, squeezing.

She kissed him again, her tongue sampling his. "I couldn't bear it."

His hands traveled up, tugging at her robe. She was pulling at his shirt.

"It's only a grave, love," he replied. "I know he kept you from it as long as he could."

"I want to stay here with you," she said heavily, panting as his mouth trailed down her neck, leaving a fire in its wake. "Forever."

He had tugged open her robe. She was nude underneath. He cupped her breasts in his hands, massaged them gently, taking a nipple into his mouth. Hermione's hands were in his hair; she moaned as he sucked on her breast, then the other eagerly, his tongue paying every attention to them.

"I've missed you so much," she repeated, her head falling back as one hand left her breast to slide down her hip and thigh, then back up to hook behind her knee. He pushed her backward gently until she was on the floor. He crawled atop her, kissing her anywhere he could reach.

"I love you, Hermione," he said hoarsely. "It was always you."

Draco's eyes snapped open when he heard a moan.

He was up at once and moved to the bed, where his wife was shifting as though she were waking.

“Hermione.”

He was on the bed beside her instantly, reached for her. Her eyes were still closed—he pressed his palm to her cheek and she leaned into his touch longingly, moaning again and twisting in her sheets.

“Sweetheart, are you in pain?”

He turned to summon Pansy to alert the Healer.

His other hand had been on her hip, but in one kick of her leg she had flipped that corner of the sheet off and his hand slid down to her mound—he found her molten heat and his eyes widened in surprise.

“Minx,” he whispered.

She gave a needful whimper, thrusting her hips in invitation.

Draco made a motion with his hand and was instantly divested of his clothing. He took the other corner of the sheet and flipped it off her impatiently, made another gesture to rid her of her slip.

Her nipples were hard, he instantly felt between her legs and found her deliciously wet and wanting.

Harry’s hand between her legs kept itself busy as his mouth continued to tease at her nipple. She was arching underneath him, blazing with need. She could feel her muscles between her legs grasping desperately for something that was not there yet. Her nails raked at his shoulders as he coiled her tighter and tighter.

“Please, Harry,” she panted. “I can’t wait. I need you.”

“Just a little longer, love,” he said, settling himself between her legs. He placed his hands on her thighs to spread them and lowered his head to her mound. “Can you wait for me?”

He lowered his tongue to her and she moaned loudly. “Yes,” she said breathlessly.

Draco tasted her slowly, taking his time.

You’ve made me wait, sweetheart. Now it’s your turn.

Her hands were in his hair, her thighs threatened to close around his head and suffocate him. His erection throbbed painfully. He stroked himself occasionally, keeping most of his focus on those glorious lips and the wetness that pooled in between.

When she climaxed, she cried out—Draco stifled it with his hand, continuing his attentions until she peaked again shortly after and her body quivered at the mercy of his tongue.

Harry held her hands down on the ground by her head, their fingers entangled in each others' as he mounted her. His eyes were glazed with want. He pressed a kiss to her lips and she returned it passionately as he began to push forward.

"Yes," she panted. "Please, Harry. I'm yours." And she pushed her hips up.

Draco groaned in pleased agony, pulsing inside her. She had thrown her head back, her palms damp in his hold as he held them down. He set out at a measured but rough pace, driving each thrust deep.

Will this wake you up at last, princess? He thought, laughing inwardly. *Was this all it took? Should I have fucked you sooner?*

A beautiful flush built up on her skin, spreading from her chest to her face. Was that a smile on her lips? Draco exhaled sharply in disbelief, his excitement driving his hips to a frenzy.

Harry moaned when he came, leaning down to press his forehead against hers, his nose nudging hers with each last thrust. Hermione tipped her head up and kissed him, wrapped her legs around his hips.

"I'm yours," she whispered, her eyes closing though she struggled to stay awake, to stare into Harry's eyes one last time.

"Always."

Darkness closed in.

Draco rolled his hips into hers one last time and pulled out, rolling onto his back beside her. Hermione was settling down into the bed slowly, her eyes still closed, a soft, satisfied smile on her lips. She turned onto her side, facing him.

Draco's eyes roved over her, gleaming. He had thought she would have woken at any point while they'd had sex. He touched her forehead. Normal.

You'd better wake tomorrow, my love, he thought. *My patience is worn enough.*

She slept on, oblivious.

He covered them both with the blanket and went to sleep, his arm slung over her waist.

Draco was buried inside her in the morning, thrusting hard and groaning in lust when she awoke suddenly, damp with sweat and panting. She was on her stomach and he was between

her legs pumping away—Hermione groaned, feeling too stiff and sore to move, her head full of cobwebs. She braced herself and tried to push off the bed, uncomprehending.

She felt Draco's hand on her back stop her and push her back down—she struggled—he lied down on top of her and thrust deep one last time, ejaculating into her.

Her heart pounded—her memory caught itself up, and she went limp as he filled her. The memory of Harry's body against hers was still so vivid—she pretending it was Harry on her, not Draco. The room spun slowly.

When he had finished, his weight disappeared from on top of her and she sat up, dazed, exhausted just from waking up.

Before she could do anything else his arms wound around her and crushed her to him. He kissed her deeply.

"How are you?" He demanded. "How do you feel?"

"I don't know," she said, her voice hoarse and cracking. "Tired. My body hurts."

"I may have contributed to that," he said, chuckling. His hands would not leave her. "I didn't think that would happen—I was so worried about you, sweetling."

Hermione stared at the bed, blinking hard, her vision still fuzzy from sleep. "How long has it been?"

"Two weeks exactly," Draco said, smoothing his hand over her hair.

Her mind reeled.

"It felt like longer..."

"You were conscious?" He asked. "Could you hear me?"

"No," she said slowly. "It just feels like it was longer than that. I don't know why."

He kissed her again. "Do you feel any different?"

"Tired, mostly."

"And your magic?"

She raised her hand, and this time there was no struggle. There was a subtle flash and her talons returned. Another, and her nudity was covered with a robe.

She raised her eyes to meet his. There was a beat. A small smile curved her mouth.

Draco was forced onto his back against the bed, his limbs restrained. He tested them, grinning.

"So bloodthirsty so soon?" He asked teasingly. "My, how you've changed."

Her lip curled.

"This was *your* fault. If you'd never caged my magic this would not have happened."

She straddled him, dragged one talon down his cheek tenderly, barely grazing his skin. He leaned into the touch hungrily, his eyes locked onto hers.

“Shall I start with your face or with your cock?” She asked, dragging that talon down over his nude body, so close to making true contact.

Draco smiled lazily.

“You keep saying you want to cut it off, but you moan so sweetly when it’s inside that delicious little pussy of yours. I think you’d miss it if you did cut it off.”

It happened in a flicker—so fast he barely caught it—her face distorted in rage and her eyes flashed red. Her talons punctured the flesh of his abdomen, sinking in.

His smile widened. *Shall I tell you now, little bird?*

“I wouldn’t miss a single part of you, ever,” she snarled.

“That tickles, sweetheart.”

She drove her talons in deeper—blood gushed forward, staining her skin.

“How about this?” She asked innocently, but her smile was wicked. She tore in one direction. The sound of flesh ripping would have made any onlooker retch—Hermione found it immensely gratifying. Organs glistened, newly exposed. She felt the heat from the inside of his body. Blood poured.

She stared down at the wreckage of his abdomen, her face lit with satisfaction and fascination.

“Does it still tickle, sweetheart?” she asked sweetly. Her hand moved toward the exposed organs, her talons sharp and ready.

“We can continue this another time,” Draco said, sounding no worse for wear. “I’m very interested to see where this will go—but you do have a son who has been extremely worried about you and who would be beyond happy to see you’re back and well.”

Hermione’s face cleared of wrath. She looked down at what she had done and froze, her face draining of color. Her talons disappeared abruptly.

“Oh, *god*. Lucio.”

She stumbled off the bed and reeled backward, staring in horror at the gaping wound. The sudden movement had blood rushing to her head—she staggered and fought to stay upright. Her vision flickered out for a second. Her legs felt unstable underneath her.

Draco had freed himself of her restraints, barely flickering at eye at the gaping wound on his abdomen. He put a hand to it and locked eyes with her as he healed it. When he pulled his hand away, it was as if nothing had ever happened.

“Very interesting,” he said.

Hermione fled the room.

14. Compromise

Your responses to the last few chapters have been incredible, thank you! I don't want to confirm any theories but I will say it's been really interesting reading them.

This story is different from my previous HLB fics in the manner that I didn't plan it out before I started writing it. The others were meticulously plotted out in advance which was a great help, even if sometimes I ditched certain plot lines. I guess I needed that more back then because I was trying to get a feel for where I wanted the fics to go, but by now I'm so comfortable in the setting and with the characters that I feel I don't need it as much. I have certain landmark plot lines in my head that I know the story has to reach but everything in between is floating in the air. It might not be the best approach but it's been working for me so far and the ending of this series is as much a mystery as it is to you, but the path there will hopefully be very interesting.

As always, thank you for your support and for reading. If you want to check out some fan art I've made for this series I've posted it exclusively on my ko-fi page (you can find me thewanderingdaughter). You can view and download it for free! There is more art on the way. I feel like I need to get a better grasp of how to draw Draco but more art is on the way so I'm getting plenty of practice in the meantime. Please leave a review if you can and tell me what you think!

Hermione had taken no more than three steps out of the bedroom when she found herself wrapped in a crushing hug. She stumbled, panic flaring in her chest, and reached up to push the unknown person away, one second away from willing her talons back, but found Pansy there and relaxed immediately.

"Oh, thank Merlin," Pansy said in a relieved gasp. "Forgive me, my Lady, I know I mustn't—I was so worried—"

Hermione hugged her back. When they pulled away, Pansy wiped at her eyes.

"I'm alright," Hermione said, trying to smile. "Just tired. And confused."

"Is my Lord still inside the bedroom?"

"Yes," Hermione said, turning pale, "and I'd like to put some distance between us and go see my son."

"Of course."

They set off quickly.

"How did it happen?" Pansy asked. "How are you?"

"I don't know," Hermione said, her breath short, shaking her head. "I feel like I can hardly understand it. I remember the moments before I went under and then I woke up. I'm sore all

over and I just want to sleep, even if that's all I've been doing."

"My Lord was almost beside himself at the start," Pansy confided. "He had Healer Lewis come see you, and he almost refused to leave your side. It's the most worried I've ever seen him."

"Yes, I imagine," Hermione said stiffly. "He'd have hated to lose his favorite possession."

"I was worried, too," Pansy said. "He called me into the room just after it happened. I thought he'd killed you at last."

"So did I." She turned to Pansy. "How is Lucio?"

Pansy faltered. "Very subdued, my Lady. He couldn't fathom that you didn't say goodbye."

At Hermione's pained expression, she hurried to add, "My Lord ordered that he not know the truth of what happened to you. Lucio has been told that you were called away by a friend on an emergency visit."

"More lies." Hermione sighed and closed her eyes. "Has it really been two weeks?"

"Unfortunately, my Lady."

And the last time she had spoken to Lucio she had told him his father was a dangerous man. What might he have suspected? What might Draco have told him during her absence? She was afraid to find out.

"What have I missed?"

"My Lord ordered me to take Lucio out many times to distract him since he was so upset. He cried a lot."

Hermione closed her eyes.

"My Lord paused his lessons for a bit, as he wanted no one else in the house. He wouldn't leave your side... I encouraged him to get out of the manor and go about his usual business. Lucio barely saw him the first week."

The thought of Draco hovering around her still while she was unconscious was not surprising, but still unappealing. Hermione pressed Pansy's hand.

"Thank you."

"I knew that even if you were unconscious you wouldn't have wanted him there," Pansy replied softly.

"I wouldn't," Hermione agreed. She glanced around the corridor.

"Strange that it still feels like I'm dreaming."

"Do you want medicine?" Pansy asked.

"No," Hermione said. "I know I'm awake. I think it's still wearing off. I'll be fine."

They had reached the nursery.

“Are you hungry?” Pansy asked. “Dinner isn’t for another two hours but I’ll have something made for you if you wish it. You lost some weight while you were asleep with fever.”

“No,” Hermione said dismissively. “I have no appetite. I’ll wait.”

“But—”

“Enough.”

Hermione’s voice had come out a little sharper than she had originally wanted.

Pansy bowed her head at the rebuke.

“Of course, my Lady. Forgive me.”

She began to leave. Hermione rushed to catch up to her.

“I’m sorry,” she said in a rush. “I’m just overwhelmed. But I need to see my son.”

“Of course,” Pansy said. “I understand. I will send word when dinner is ready.”

She left.

When Hermione entered the nursery she immediately located Lucio sitting with his back to the door, flipping through a book rather morosely. She knocked softly on the wall.

“Darling,” she called softly.

At once he turned and on seeing her, his eyes went round. He threw the book aside and ran to her, threw his arms around her.

“You didn’t say goodbye,” he said accusingly, his tears absorbed by her robe. “I was scared.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, clutching him to her. “I didn’t have time. I missed you very much, my love.”

He pulled away to see her face, wiped at his eyes. “Where did you go?”

Hermione hesitated. “To see somebody who needed my help.”

“Why did they need help?”

Damn. Hermione thought fast.

“They needed help with research.”

Lucio frowned. “Oh. On what?”

Hermione closed her eyes. Her head hurt. “I can’t tell you, my love. It’s a secret.”

“Ok,” he said, hiccuping. “Can I go with you next time?”

“Of course,” Hermione said. “I’ll never leave you behind again.”

There was a sound at the door, and they looked up in time to see Draco entering the nursery. Hermione immediately felt Lucio tense beside her and grip her hand more tightly.

She put an arm around him and met eyes with her husband, who was staring at her expectantly.

"Aren't you glad mummy's back, Lucio?" He asked.

"Yes," Lucio said, his voice subdued.

"I am, too," Hermione replied, and kissed Lucio on the top of his head.

But I didn't come back for you, she thought to Draco. Only him.

"We both missed you terribly," Draco said. "This house isn't the same without you, my love."

"So I heard." She tried to keep her suspicion from marring her expression.

"Is it time for dinner?" Lucio asked. Hermione heard his stomach growl.

"Yes," Draco said. "You'll have to eat with Pansy tonight, Lucio. Your mother and I have an errand or two to run."

Hermione frowned. Draco gave her a meaningful look, encouraging her to look back and find the answer.

It hit her like a sandbag had fallen into her lap.

"Do you have to?" Lucio asked her.

"Yes, she must," Draco said firmly. "There will be no bargaining on this. Pansy's here to take you downstairs. You will eat your dinner and brush your teeth and go straight to bed and we'll see you tomorrow."

"Can't I go, too?"

"I'm afraid not, my love," Hermione said quickly. "It's boring stuff, and it won't take long. Besides, I can hear how hungry you are. Go with Pansy and I'll see you in the morning, okay?"

"Okay," Lucio said unhappily.

Believe me, my little love, if I had a choice I would stay here with you, Hermione thought.

They walked to the door where Pansy was waiting beside Draco.

Hermione knelt down again, smoothed Lucio's curls, and kissed his cheek.

"We won't be long. I love you," she said, gave him a quick, meaningful look with her eyes.

Everything will be okay.

His eyes went to the floor. "I love you too."

"Goodnight, Lucio," Draco said.

"Goodnight, father," Lucio said, making no effort to hug or kiss him. Hermione could barely contain her surprise. What had happened? Why was Lucio so cold to his father so

suddenly? Had Draco done or said something to him to change his attitude so drastically? Draco didn't seem bothered in the least.

Lucio reluctantly let go of her hand, then took Pansy's offered one. They left in silence.

Hermione blinked as a heavy cloak materialized from thin air, fastening itself around her. Draco held out his arm.

"Even with your magic back," he said as she took it, "you can't Apparate outside of the Manor without my aid or permission, or as an extension with Pansy. But you would need my permission for that as well."

"I guessed as much," she said.

Her wand appeared in his hand. She took it when he offered, secured it in the wand pocket of her robe, then took his arm again.

They disappeared with a muted *crack*.

They landed on a steep hill that overlooked the grounds.

It was night time at the Hogwarts ruins as well—the sky was clear and stars speckled the sky all over. The air was cool and crisp, a hint of humidity laced through the atmosphere as if it had rained recently.

Construction had already begun. Hermione could see at once that this new school was going to be at least twice the size that Hogwarts had once been.

"You could have just rebuilt the original," she heard herself say.

"The original was a hideous mess," Draco said. "Obnoxious moving staircases, blocked passageways, trapdoors. Dumbledore might have fixed them up and made the school look better but kept them out of his pathetic fondness for their novelty. My school will be the Hogwarts that always should have been."

"Will you name it after yourself, too?"

He ignored her sarcasm.

"We'll see."

"Why are we here?"

"I wanted you to see the progress," he said. "While you were under, I hated to leave your side. Pansy insisted I leave you be and get back to work. So I hurried the start of construction."

Hermione could easily picture him wrapped around her body and not leaving for the duration of her bizarre sleep. Despite Pansy's kind efforts she knew Draco still must have spent as much time with her as he could manage. She hated to think of what he had done (because there was no chance of there being a might, he had most certainly done *something*) to her while she had been unresponsive.

“It will be beautiful,” he said, his pale eyes taking in the foundation that had already been completed, the stone walls that were not even halfway erected, the markings for towers. “And it will be formidable.”

Curiously, Hermione felt no pain at the sight of her former school and home completely wiped off the land. Her eyes roved over the stone and wood impassively, wondering how many workers he had on the construction. It had to be at least a hundred. She had never seen wizards doing construction and found she was extremely interested in how that might work.

There was the lake, just beyond. The Forbidden Forest. Hagrid’s hut was gone, too. The Quidditch pitch was nothing but an oval set into the ground, the seating towers having been razed long ago. She wondered briefly whether he would build another pitch, then realized she didn’t really care.

This new school would be a blank slate. Hogwarts and its history was gone. Reduced to nothing but ash, glass, and rock, and the stories that lied between pages of a book few would really care about looking into.

So much of her life was contained between those pages. The good *and* the bad. She thought of how Malfoy had ruined the castle for her in their time there, how he had fouled not only her nook in the library but their common room as well, and the Great Hall and the dungeons; even the room of requirement. He had turned her second home into a labyrinth of pain.

Here was where this nightmare had begun.

It dawned on her that she was glad to see it gone. The thought should have frightened her, but it didn’t.

His hand was on her arm.

“I thought I’d lost you,” he whispered, bringing her to him, crushing her with his hug. “To think that it was your magic that almost took you away from me...” he chuckled. “What irony.”

“All your own fault,” she said.

“Yes,” he agreed. “Perhaps I should have curbed your magic from the start rather than trap and enclose it entirely, but how was I to know?”

“Hindsight is a gift,” Hermione said. “It’s a shame your arrogance keeps you from it most of the time.”

He laughed.

“You’ve got a knife for a tongue, sweetling,” he said, grinning, cupping her cheek in his hand. “I’ve avoided cutting myself thus far, I’m eager to see what the future brings.”

She looked away.

“Did Lucio see me at all?”

“No. We told him you went away for a bit and that was all. Don’t tell him what happened. He doesn’t need to know about this.”

She actually agreed, for once. No need to worry him further about something that was out of his control and had already resolved itself.

"We had Healer Lewis come examine you and he had no answers other than to wait it out. The fever ravaged you day by day and I was sick with worry. I didn't know what to do, but once it ended and I realized you weren't in danger of dying, I felt safe enough to leave you for short periods of time," he said, "but I would have waited as long as it took for you to wake. Luckily, my wait wasn't as long as I'd initially feared."

His hands cupped her throat. She looked at him curiously.

"You sound so sure," she said. "But you just said Lewis didn't know how to help."

Draco kissed her, bending his neck to nuzzle at her throat.

"Let me taste you, sweetheart," he said gently. "Now that you're awake again, you must taste divine."

She froze, the implication of his words sinking deep.

"You drank from me while I was unconscious."

He nipped at her throat and she flinched.

"At least I didn't fuck you. Or would you have preferred that instead? I did *try* to make an effort on that front, sweetheart, believe me. But the night before you woke... Were you conscious at all when you were twisting and moaning in your sleep, begging for my touch? I obliged happily—how could I resist you?"

She pushed him away but he held on to her firmly—she held him at arm's length.

"You said you weren't a vampire."

"I'm not. You saw me in the sun. My reflection is intact, even." He shrugged. "This is the Horcrux's doing, in my opinion, but I'll not question it further. If I hadn't taken your blood I might never have known for sure when you'd come back."

"How often?" She asked, her hands probing her neck cautiously, feeling for any wounds she might not have noticed.

"Every day to track your progress. I healed the wounds, you won't find them."

"What did you mean I was begging for you?" She asked.

"The night before you woke, you were the most active you'd ever been while you were unconscious," Draco said. "Until then, you were stiff as a board and barely moved except to breathe. Then that night, you were moaning in your sleep—I thought the fever had returned so I went to check on you, and found you wanting and wet. I figured it would help you wake up to comply."

The air around them was suddenly still. Her heart pounded.

So had the dream with Harry come about because Draco was already having sex with her body, or had the dream come first and she had been reacting in her sleep enough to catch

Draco's attention? Or had they come about spontaneously with no relation to the other? Gooseflesh broke out over her skin. She didn't understand.

It had felt so real. She had felt everything so intensely. Every touch. Every kiss. Every stroke.

The last time she'd had a dream that vivid had been when she had dreamt of her parents receiving Mr. Weasley's letter informing them of her disappearance. She had tried to write it off as a result of her worrying over them. Now she wondered if it had really happened, if she'd had a vision through a dream.

A bead of sweat dotted her temple. She hoped Draco wouldn't notice, that he wouldn't question it.

Harry was dead. He had been for several years now. Why... *how* could she see and feel him as if he were flesh and blood? Suppose it was her internal desire for him manifesting into that dream. Then why had it not happened before?

Why now?

Dizziness gripped her. She clenched her hand into a loose fist, her thumb tracing the inside of her finger where the ring used to be. Had the removal of the ring played a part in Harry's sudden visitation? Draco had made it to punish anyone who dared to touch her. Had that magic and his obsession bled through into her subconscious somehow to keep Harry from appearing?

Or am I reading too much into a dream?

Had Draco peered into her dream? Did he know who she had dreamt of? The answer had to be no, because his fury would have made itself known at once.

"I don't remember that," she said stiffly at last. If she had known her physical self was reacting to Harry's attentions she would have stopped at once out of fear to Draco's response to them. She thanked her unconscious self for not having uttered Harry's name during the dream.

"That's a pity," Draco said. "I'll relish that memory for some time."

Relish it all you want. It wasn't you I moaned for.

"I should have known it would take more than a kiss to wake you up, Princess," he said, chuckling, coming in closer to grope her bottom.

Hermione looked away.

"If you've fed from me, will that have any effect?" Hermione asked, her stomach twisting. Her hand felt her throat again.

"I've noticed no changes," he said, the slight night breeze ruffling his hair. "My feeding seems to serve no purpose other than satisfying myself."

"I don't like it," she said after a moment. "It's too animalistic, Draco. Even for you."

He was silent for a moment, staring at her.

“Why does my hunger still scare you, sweetling?” He asked, his eyes nearly glowing in the dark. “After all this time?”

She gave him a level stare. “Because you keep pushing it farther.”

He approached her slowly and she stood her ground, fighting her flinch when he bent to nuzzle against her throat again, sighing at the warmth that rushed there under her flesh. His hand was pressed against her sternum, measuring her pulse.

“You would deny your Lord husband the right to your blood?” He asked, stroking her skin.

His other hand, still on her bum, slipped lower, pushed into her intimately. A reminder and a threat.

“You know I can take it whenever I want.”

And he already had. She had a sudden, gruesome desire to tear him open and steal her blood back. If her attack had given him no pain then she would try again. As many times as it took, even if all it afforded her was merely a gasp of pain from him.

His teeth nibbled softly at her throat. She held her breath.

“How often is your craving?”

“Often than you’d like, I’m sure.”

“How much do you usually take?”

“That depends but it’s usually no more than a glassful.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Naturally,” he said. “But I told you the truth. You can either let me continue to feed from you with your consent or I’ll continue to take it regardless.”

“If I consent,” she began carefully, approaching her next words with caution, “I want to be able to Apparate on my own.”

He smiled, his teeth gleaming.

“Are you planning on going somewhere?”

“I miss Apparating on my own,” she said. “Plus, if I’m ever in danger or caught by the enemy, how would I escape?”

“You’ve been able to escape me without the aid of Apparition before. Plus, if you were ever in danger I would stop at nothing to get to you.”

“If you want me to be on your side and fight with you, I need to be fully equipped,” she said. “Or what if Lucio is ever in danger and you can’t get to him?”

He thought on it for a moment. She waited tensely.

“My answer is no for now,” he said at last. “You deceived me about Longbottom. I told you I know about the plans you made with him. Pardon me for saying my trust in you has yet to recover. I might change my mind but you’re welcome to persuade me into changing it faster.”

Hermione held his stare.

“Fine.”

It was worth a shot.

“Speaking of Longbottom...”

He offered her his arm again and she took it warily. An owl hooted loudly nearby.

“Where is it?” He asked. “His hideout.”

“It’s not a hideout,” she said. “I don’t think it is. It’s just a concealed space. I don’t think it serves much purpose.”

“Then where is this concealed space?”

“At the Burrow.”

He frowned. “The what?”

“The Weasley’s home,” she clarified.

“Fitting name for it,” he said, snorting.

He held his hand over her head, muttering a long string of Latin. Hermione felt no change and he offered no explanation when he finished and repeated the process on himself. He gripped her harder and they Apparated away again.

They landed on the front lawn. Hermione looked around, her heart pounding. Draco’s hand was still gripping her arm but it loosened and fell away. A stronger wind blew here. Cold, Hermione rubbed at her arms. Draco surveyed the old home with disdain etched across his face.

“Lead me to it,” he said.

There was nothing to be done. Hermione steeled herself, walked around the deteriorated tall and narrow house and reached the gate surrounding the backyard. She paused, turning to look at Draco.

“Pansy couldn’t see it when we were here,” she said. “Only I could. I don’t think you’ll be able to see it now either unless their wards are down, and I doubt that’s the case.”

“I could break them down if I wanted to,” he said flippantly, his hand touching her back, then sliding up to hold the nape of her neck. “I’ve been studying wards for a very long time, now.”

“You don’t say.”

He gave her a sly smile.

“Then why don’t you?” she asked.

“Why would I raise their alarm before I’ve even got the intel I came here for? The destruction can wait, Hermione. But if you pull any funny business, all this comes down in an instant. Remember that.”

She was still looking to the garden. "I will."

"They sensed you when you entered the space last time."

"Yes. They waited until I was deep enough to appear."

"They won't be able to sense us here now."

"You put protections on us before we came here," she said. "That's what you were doing?"

"Yes. Can't have your little saviors rushing in and spoiling our mission. Now describe it to me."

She hesitated. His hand curled more firmly around her neck.

"You've already betrayed them," he reminded her, breathing into her ear. "There's no going back."

"It's just the garden when you come in," she said. He stood beside her rigidly, his clear eyes intensely fixated on the garden, taking in every detail. "But they've expanded it somehow. You reach a certain point and just keep going. The garden isn't that big—when I was there it eventually turned into a forest and at the end of it was the gravesite."

"Then the graves I see now aren't real?" He asked.

"I don't know," she said. "They might just be illusions to keep you and other enemies away. I didn't think to ask."

He turned to give her a knowing look. "Potter's grave was there."

Her heart skipped a beat. "Yes. Among many others."

"If I'd known they'd mourn him so properly I might have sent them the remnants," he said. "Really, *that's* the best they could do?"

He was baiting her again. Hermione ignored it, let her anger ebb and flow through her until she was calm again. She took a deep breath quietly.

"What else was there?"

"Nothing. I only saw the graves. Then Luna and Neville came out. I didn't know it was them at first. I tried to run. I thought it was you."

He had let her go and began to walk, circling her slowly.

"And what did they tell you?"

"They told me they had warded the garden to keep you out. They said they've been studying wards as well and that they'd put some up around the Burrow so they could detect anyone who came in, and that they'd been waiting for me."

"What kind of wards?"

"I didn't ask," she said. "But they were able to touch me without the ring taking action."

At that, his eyes narrowed. "And that's why I didn't find out until later."

"Yes."

A smile quirked his lips. "Interesting..." Suddenly, his gaze sharpened on her. "He touched you."

She raised her chin defensively. "I hugged *him*."

"What difference does it make?" He snapped. "You still broke my rule."

"I am not yours to control any longer," she said through grit teeth. "I will touch who I please."

At that, he chuckled.

"I still have the ring, sweetheart," he said calmly. "Keep in mind that any time you disobey me I will seriously consider forcing it back on you. You might have your magic back but remember you will still obey me."

His eyes flicked toward the garden.

"Go back in there. See if anything's changed."

She looked to the garden then back at him, distrusting.

"I could go in if I wanted," he agreed. "But you've got to do your part. I told you you were going to take down Longbottom. This is where it starts."

Resistance welled in her, mixed with anger.

"What happens if they come again?" She asked coolly.

He approached her quickly, crushed her to him for a rough kiss.

"Then there will be new graves to be added here. Now go."

She entered the garden, steeling herself, his stare heavy on her all the while.

Now that she knew what to expect she felt no surprise when she walked toward the graves, watching them closely as they shimmered slightly, their illusion wavering. The space around her began to expand slowly and she stopped in her tracks to watch it but it stopped as she did and resumed when she began to move again.

How had she not noticed it the first time around? It was an actual sensation, how everything had changed.

Maybe you couldn't sense it because your magic was muted.

It made sense. Now she had it back, her nerves tingled at passing through the wards. It was like her own magic was responding to the magic already here.

After she had passed the wards she looked back to the direction in which she'd come.

She couldn't see the garden or Draco over the fence. It was like she had walked several miles in only a few steps.

This might have been another test. Maybe Draco was counting on Neville or Luna to come and try to save her to test her loyalty.

As much as she wanted to see Neville again, she fervently hoped Draco's counter-spell had worked and that neither of them would be sensed here. She would be in and out.

She walked in silence, dreading what might happen. Draco's watchful eye had been cut off some distance ago but curiously, she still felt watched. She took her wand from the pocket of her robe and clasped it tightly in one hand.

When the path led her to the gravesite, it was just as it had been previously. She stood before them, suddenly not wanting to come any closer.

It had been about a month since her visit here. How much had happened between then and this visit...

Gooseflesh rose along her arms. She rubbed at them, peering over her shoulder, and held out her wand.

"Homenum revelio."

There was nobody around. That settled her nerves a little.

Could it be Draco still watching?

No. His stare was always like a weight on her. This felt different, and she began to wonder if Neville had set up a different sort of surveillance on this area.

She looked up, frowning, trying to reach out with her magic to sense anything amiss. She wasn't as studied as Draco in wards so she wasn't sure what to look for.

Nothing.

Quickly, before she lost confidence, she magicked a large flat stone from a short distance away and embedded it into the ground so that it stood as tall as the others.

She raised her wand higher, frowning in concentration, taking pains to be precise as her arm moved.

It felt so good to use magic again, even for the simplest things. Nevermind the fact that each time she was about to use it she found herself with the long-ingrained fear that it would do nothing, thanks to Draco.

When she lowered it, the engraving on the stone still flared red from the heat of her wand, but cooled an instant later.

Danielle, the stone read.

I don't know her last name.

It would have to do.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly, still feeling watched.

A gentle breeze blew around her.

She looked around again.

"I don't know if you can hear me," she began slowly. "Something tells me you can."

Trees rustled softly around her, as if encouraging her to go on.

She looked down at her wand.

"I got my magic back," she continued. "But I paid a price. You've probably heard what I did by now."

A tear trickled down her cheek and she wiped it away quickly.

"They would have given her to Crabbe. It doesn't excuse what I did. But I couldn't condemn anybody else to a fate like mine."

Her hands gripped at the loose, roughly-woven material of her robe. She felt a broken fingernail snag on the fabric and impatiently yanked it loose. The tip of her fingernail tore off and fell onto the floor.

"I warned you something like this would happen. He'll corrupt me to keep me on his side. I'm only doing enough to increase my chances of escape but he always wants more and even with my magic back I can barely fight back. Don't come for me. I couldn't keep this secret from him—he knows about this place and he's outside the Burrow right now waiting for me, and he isn't in the mood for negotiating."

The wind blew stronger. She raised her voice.

"I don't know if I'll be allowed here again. If I try to contact you, he'll know. Don't come for me. I'll figure this out on my own."

She turned and left quickly, unable to bear the sight of the grave markers any longer.

The wind continued to rustle at the greenery around the little clearing of the magicked forest. As the leaves moved a tiny light on a small, cleverly hidden Muggle surveillance camera blinked red from where it had been stationed inside of a shrub.

When they arrived back at the Manor Lucio had already been put to bed and Pansy waited on them at the front door.

"Shall I warm up your dinners?" Pansy asked.

"Yes," Draco said. On seeing Hermione's look of disagreement he cut her off before she could speak.

"You need to eat something, Hermione. You've had nothing but liquids all this time."

Their meals were served and ready for them on the table when they entered the dining room. Draco held out a chair for Hermione and then sat down once she was seated.

"So," he began, grabbing his fork and knife, looking at her expectantly. "What did you find?"

"Nothing," she said, taking a drink of water. She met his eye. "There was nothing new or different. I saw nobody there."

"The graves were all still there?"

“Yes.”

“And you’re sure there was nothing else there?”

“Yes. It’s just a gravesite, Draco. There was no sign of them staying there before and there was no sign of it now.”

“I have to be thorough, sweetheart.”

They ate in silence and when done, retreated to the bedroom.

There was a knock at the door, and Pansy entered.

“My Lord,” she said, bowing. “Healer Lewis has arrived.”

“Send him in,” Draco replied.

Hermione looked at him curiously.

“You need to be examined,” he said gently. “You’re awake, but I won’t take any risks if whatever hurt you is still inside you.”

Footsteps trailed up to the door and Hermione looked up to see Healer Lewis standing there, wand in one hand, his kit in the other, his robes draped over a bent arm.

He bowed.

“My Lord, my Lady,” he said. “Good evening.”

“Come in and close the door,” Draco said.

Lewis obeyed. Hermione watched him carefully.

Healer Lewis was a man she had met time and time again although she had not always been conscious enough to remember every occasion. He had delivered Lucio and had given her potions to heal properly afterward. He had treated her on several occasions after Draco’s beatings, before Pansy had come to work for them. Pansy could heal bruises and cuts but she could not mend fractured bones, and that happened to be something Healer Lewis was very good at. He was friendly and professional, and she supposed she ought to trust him by now judging by the amount of times he had healed her, but she could never shake the fact that he was employed by Draco and by now had to know the awful extent of their relationship, and still chose to work for her husband.

Then again, she wouldn’t have been surprised in the least if Draco had him under some sort of threat.

“It is good to see you awake, my Lady,” Healer Lewis said, setting his kit down on the floor.

She nodded.

“She awoke naturally this morning,” Draco said.

“Did you? Would you please sit down, my Lady?”

An examination. She’d had plenty of those in the years past. And always under Draco’s scrutinous eye. This man, however professional he might be, had tended to her unconscious

self many times over. Healer, he might be, and the occasions warranted, but she didn't like the thought of it.

Hermione bit her tongue and sat stiffly on the armchair.

"Do you remember what happened before you fell unconscious?" Healer Lewis asked.

"Draco took my ring off," she said. "And my magic came back."

Draco went to stand beside her, stroked her cheek.

"You were in pain. You said it was too much."

"It was," she said. "It overwhelmed me. I couldn't handle it."

"It was tearing you apart," Draco added, his voice slightly bitter.

"How painful was it, my Lady?" Lewis asked. He approached and wordlessly indicated he was going to begin the examination. Hermione nodded and he stepped closer, ran his wand along her form, frowning in concentration. She had found herself holding her breath, ready to flinch in pain at the streak of pain Draco's ring would surely deliver once Lewis touched her, and then froze, remembering it was gone.

"I could hardly speak," Hermione replied. "I thought it would go away quickly but it didn't stop. It felt like burning. I think I went into shock."

Lewis nodded, carefully lifting her arm to scan it, then the other. Blue wisps emerged from his wand but he seemed to be searching for something else. He didn't find it. He lowered his wand and straightened, summoned a thermometer from his kit. Hermione wanted to sigh in frustration.

"You were unconscious for a fortnight," he said, reading the temperature. It was normal. He stowed the thermometer away. "Your body was very rigid and your fever lasted over a week. You have lost a considerable amount of weight from the last time I saw you, my lady. I feared it would not stop."

Hermione looked down at herself, mildly surprised. No wonder Pansy and Draco had insisted on her eating. She had been too preoccupied to notice.

Healer Lewis now bent on one knee before her, holding his wand aloft, and with another gesture indicated he was going to conduct another examination. Hermione stared straight ahead as he shined a light into one eye, then the other, instructing her to look this way and that. Finding nothing amiss again, he stood.

"May I take your pulse, my Lady?"

She offered her wrist and he took it, holding it for a minute to count her heartbeats. He finished and let her go.

"That you went into shock is reasonable considering you were not prepared that my Lord would give back your magic so easily. Rather, I wonder why the fever should occur. To last so long and yet you exhibited no other symptoms of illness... and then none of my potions alleviated it." Lewis shook his head. "It raises more questions than I can answer."

“What if the magic was the fever?” Hermione asked, frowning. “There’s no other reason why medical potions couldn’t cure a simple fever.”

“An interesting theory,” Lewis said slowly. “I have never heard of magic reacting in such a manner so it is difficult to come to a conclusion. Why would it *eat* (for lack of a better word) at you in the guise of a fever? In the cases of magical folk who unintentionally unleash magic, it is fleeting and radiates outward. Why would it go inward?”

“It did both,” Draco said, his eyes on the stained glass window. “She shattered that window there.”

“Fascinating,” Healer Lewis hesitated. “Have you used magic much today since waking, my Lady?”

Exposed gore. Blood pouring from Draco’s abdomen. The sound of ripping flesh. She knew with certainty that Draco was smirking even though she couldn’t see his face. She pictured the handmade grave marker she had inscribed.

“Yes.”

“How did it feel?”

“Easy,” she said. “I didn’t have to try hard.”

“Would you try again please, my Lady?” Lewis asked. “Something different, if you please.”

She summoned her wand, pointed it toward the bed, and concentrated, muttered a spell.

They waited. Hermione’s stomach sank. She closed her eyes and concentrated harder.

There was a spark, then an audible *woosh*. The bed burst into flames that reached the ceiling.

Draco’s stared at the flames impassively, his eyes alight with their intensity. Lewis staggered backward.

She ended it swiftly, settling more comfortably into her seat as if nothing had just happened.

Lewis stared at her. There was fear in his eyes.

“I believe that should answer your question,” Draco said to Healer Lewis. “We will continue this another time. Pansy will see you out.”

When Lewis was gone and Draco had cleared the smoke from the room and restored the bed, Hermione was still seated, holding her wand.

“You’ll have to become less reliant on that,” Draco said, gesturing to it.

“Why?”

“It’s easier to do magic wandlessly.”

"I don't care," Hermione said, clutching the wand more tightly. "If I want to use my wand after being kept from it for so long, that's *my* prerogative."

He sighed. "If you insist. But I would still have Pansy train you in wandless magic."

She stood, and her wand was taken from her hand and floated into Draco's waiting palm. He set it down on the night table.

"See how handy it can be?"

She glared.

He helped her undress, his hands roaming over her skin.

"Were you telling the truth when you said you didn't have sex with me while I was asleep?" She asked.

"Yes," he said, his voice coming in a soft rush of breath along the nape of her neck. "I only touched you on the last day, when you wanted me to."

She nodded, a hidden weight slipping from her shoulders. At the same time, he had unzipped her gown and it pooled to the floor. He took a chunk of her hair in one hand and moved it away from her neck, stepping in closer from behind her, kissing her shoulder.

Hermione looked down at herself, gauging how much thinner she looked. She could see her ribs and hip bones more clearly than ever before. Shock bent her brow.

How much did I lose?

She hadn't had time to inspect herself at all since she had woken. No wonder Draco and Pansy had been so worried.

"You didn't use a contraceptive spell earlier."

His hand gripped a breast, thumbed at her nipple. "What of it?"

"Fix it now, my Lord," she said, her heart beating fast. "Please."

He nipped at her skin. "I told you I wanted more children from you, wife. Let it be."

"No," she said, struggling against him. "I don't want it."

"Let it be, Hermione."

She summoned her wand.

"I'll do it, then."

He flicked his hand to the side and her wand skittered from her hand, falling to the floor.

"I think not."

He pushed her onto the bed, straddled her, catching her wrists in each hand.

"First you would deny me your blood, now you'd deny me another heir. You've grown rather bold, sweetling. If you want your ring back so quickly, I'll oblige you."

"Now isn't the time, Draco!"

"It's the *perfect* time," he hissed into her ear. "I could have lost you. I decided I wouldn't leave it for a second longer. You'll take my seed until you're carrying another heir. We'll build an empire, you and I."

"One son should be enough for you!"

"You don't see how bored he is by himself?" Draco asked. "He'd benefit from company closer to his age and you know it."

"You're not going to manipulate me into agreeing," She raised her hand, tearing it from his grip. Her talons had returned and she moved to strike.

Draco's eyes flashed. Her arm halted in mid-air, her talons gone as quickly as they had come.

She glared. Draco leaned in closer.

"Save your fires, little bird," he reminded her, his voice low. His eyes were venomous. "I am *not* in the mood."

He brushed a tear from her cheek.

"Remember that I don't need your consent," he warned as his hand traveled down her body. "Speaking of which, you should know that I finished your Horcrux for you while you were unconscious."

She froze for a second as she absorbed the news.

She felt no surprise. Just rage. It was *exactly* the kind of thing he would do—and apparently had—done. To take advantage of her unconsciousness in such a way had her seething.

It was too late. He was always one step ahead.

"I knew something felt off," she whispered, her nostrils flaring. "I told you I didn't want one, husband. Let me open up your chest again to make it clear to you just how *happy* I am by this news."

Draco laughed gently. His hand cupped her mound, playing with the soft curls there.

"I told you I'd take no risks after I thought I almost lost you."

He pushed her thighs apart farther, settling comfortably between them. His cock was erect, dripping precum.

"*Look at me,*" she said urgently. "I'm in no state to have another child. I need to recover, Draco. Give me time."

He paused.

She was breathing quickly in both fear and anger, and seeing his uncertainty, pounced.

"Did you even research to see if one can still conceive after making a Horcrux?"

He bent down to kiss her deeply, his tongue sliding against hers. He broke the kiss, his forehead resting against hers as he pushed inside her slowly, then lost patience and rushed the

rest in in one sharp thrust. She gasped.

“There’s no other way to find out than by trying.”

She rolled away from him, moving to get off the bed when he caught her by the arm.

“What,” she said dully.

Silently, he pressed his hand to her lower abdomen and cast a contraceptive spell.

Hermione felt relief sweep through her.

“Thank you, my Lord.”

“Once you’re recovered, this stops,” he said. “And I won’t have any more protests from you.”

She said nothing, holding his stare until he settled an arm under his pillow and fell asleep. She went to the bathroom and locked herself into it.

The next morning Hermione rose before Draco. The morning sky was gray. She had stretched and moved to roll off the bed when Draco’s arms pulled her back, startling her.

He breathed in deeply, yawning, and kissed her shoulder, then let her go.

Gratefully, Hermione rushed to wash up and change and left the room as quickly as possible.

The grass was cold under her bare feet. She clutched her shawl around herself more tightly, her wand grasped in one hand. A cool and heavy mist hung in the air. The scent of lavender carried through the air and she breathed it in deeply, trying to fill her lungs.

When she had got a far enough distance from the manor, she stopped, turned to make sure Draco or Pansy had not followed her.

She stepped under the protective cover of a tree and raised her wand. She thought hard.

“Expecto Patronum.”

A silvery mist emanated weakly from her wand. It flickered and could not take shape.

She grasped at another memory and tried again.

“*Expecto Patronum.*”

It produced the same result.

She thought of herself, Harry and Ron, their happiest moments together. She thought of herself and Harry. She thought of her first train ride to Hogwarts. Of her parents. Of Lucio.

She tried again. And again. And again.

The otter never took form.

She had expected as much.

15. The Pervasive Illusion

The world is kind of bonkers right now so I really hope everyone is okay. Take care of yourselves! It's hard to not feel lost right now. I hope we can all get through 2020 safely.

Here is a new and **long** chapter. Many interesting things happen. Reviews are always, always welcome. I've posted some new pieces I made for my own fics on my social media (links in my bio) and I'm pretty proud of some of them so check them out if you like.

The family had spent the better part of the morning in the library. The day was unusually cool but still bright—the library's windows were all uncovered and flooded the huge room with light. Hermione would rather have slept in a little longer, or go for a walk outside, but after breakfast Draco had taken her hand and ordered her and Lucio to accompany him to the library. He had given no reason why, and she had not asked—she suspected he merely wanted their company, and if that was all he wanted then she would oblige (not that she had much choice, his large hand was a cuff around her wrist as he had led her and Lucio to the library).

When they'd got there he'd said nothing, merely given her a kiss and then went to his desk where a hefty pile of correspondence demanded attention. Lucio had looked out the window rather unhappily—Hermione could sense his anxiousness to go play outside, but if he wanted to complain he said nothing. Hermione noticed Lucio gave Draco and his desk a wide berth as he wandered around the library, finally coming to take her hand.

She had sensed distress in his demeanor but felt he wouldn't be so forthcoming with Draco around—they would have to speak privately later. They had walked around the library and he had been quieter than normal which worried her, again wondering what had transpired while she had been unconscious. He didn't seem inclined to speak and neither did she so they roamed around in reassuring silence. Hermione made sure to squeeze his little hand gently, and he looked up at her, his pale eyes solemn.

Did he hurt you? She kept wondering, fighting the urges to glare suspiciously at Draco, who sat at a desk by a window, reading numerous letters and drafting short replies, that day's yet-unread copy of the *Daily Prophet* still fresh and folded to his side.

When they had tired of their walk Hermione had taken a book at random from one of the many bookcases and sat down on a thick rug with Lucio. There they were surrounded by bookcases and Draco couldn't see them. She noticed Lucio relax almost immediately and felt a pang of sympathy, but didn't comment on it.

The book had turned out to be a travel journal written by a long-deceased wizard who'd decided to travel to Romania in search of rare dragons. His accounts were funny and detailed, and she read them to Lucio, who paid rapt attention and laughed where it was appropriate, but still she sensed his mind was elsewhere. All the talk of travel and dragons made her think of Bill—and Norbert the baby dragon, whom she'd had the fortune to meet in her first year at

Hogwarts. Pain twinged at the resurfacing of the memories—she felt her voice shake briefly as she read and cleared her throat, detached herself from them, and set the book down.

Lucio looked at her curiously. She said nothing and merely smiled, reached out to bop his nose with her finger—he giggled, and she felt her mood lighten briefly.

“You look sad,” he said. “Are you sad, mummy?”

“A little,” she admitted. She thought about telling him about Norbert and Bill, but changed her mind. Draco probably wouldn’t want her to, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to talk about it, anyway.

“Have you ever seen a dragon before?” He asked, staring at an illustration from the book of a Welsh dragon, its huge wings opening and closing.

She found herself wanting to lie.

“Yes,” she said. “Many years ago.”

“What kind of dragon? Was it very big?”

“A Hungarian Horntail,” she replied. “A very dangerous type of dragon. It was enormous.”

She wouldn’t say under what circumstances she’d seen it, and whom had faced it in her Fourth year.

Excited now, his eyes wide, Lucio tugged on her sleeve.

“Did you fight it?” Were you scared?”

She laughed. “Goodness, no, I didn’t fight it. It was far away, but I was scared of it. Its roar was so loud, even covering my ears didn’t help.”

“Wow,” Lucio said. “I want to see one, too! I’d fight it!”

“It’s extremely rare to find a dragon in the wild,” Hermione said in her old lecturing voice, the one she’d used countless times with Harry and Ron. Another twinge at her heart. “Most of them are in captivity. The best thing to do is to Apparate away. Their fire reaches so far, they could burn you to a crisp before you reach them.”

“Not me,” Lucio said stoutly, “I’ll bring my broom, I’ll fly away!”

The vivid, haunting memory of Harry speeding around the Horntail on his Firebolt flashed across her mind’s eye—Hermione flinched before she could stop herself.

“Never confront a dragon unless you’re a trained handler,” she heard herself saying sharply. “It’s too dangerous. They don’t play, and they *will* kill you.”

Lucio looked hurt. Regret tore through her.

I should have just played along.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. “I just want to make sure you know to be careful.”

He nodded and accepted her hug. The book lay forgotten on the floor.

“Can I play outside, mummy?”

She looked out the window, studied the sky.

“Yes. Pansy will go with you, of course.”

“Okay,” Lucio said, standing quickly, almost buzzing with the prospect of a good race with Pansy, or another flying session. Perhaps he might even manage to catch a frog this time! He’d been trying for days. If he caught one, maybe they’d let him keep it as a pet. Really, he would have preferred an owl, but a frog was a good place to start.

“Make sure you’re back inside before dinner,” mummy reminded him gently. “Father doesn’t like it when you’re late.”

Lucio nodded silently, his face falling.

“Where did you and father go yesterday?” He asked.

Mummy took the book from the floor, brought it to her lap.

“We went to look at some buildings,” she said. “Your father wanted to show me some of his projects.”

Our projects.

She couldn’t keep distancing herself from the fact that she was very much part of this now. He might do as he liked with the construction of his new boarding school, but he kept saying that now she would be the one to destroy Neville, and had made her take her first steps in that course of action the night before, at the Burrow.

Would he find out that she had defied him even then? She remembered how empty the secret place had been, but she still couldn’t shake the fact that she knew she was being watched, that someone had known she was there, and that they might have heard her message.

He probably expected it. Every time he gives me some modicum of freedom, another invisible chain is added to the collar on my neck.

There was so much more she should have said. Why hadn’t she told them about his Horcrux? Why hadn’t she told them about her own? She wanted to smack her palm against her forehead—she was losing herself—she normally wasn’t this forgetful—that, or Draco had put some sort of charm on her to keep from disclosing it to anyone.

She wouldn’t put it past him.

It’s one thing to tell them about his. It’s another entirely to add you have one now, too. You’re turning into a monster in front of them. Of course you didn’t want to tell them. Draco probably didn’t restrict you from it to see what you would do. The thing is, what did he want me to do? Did I play right into his hand?

She sighed, stood, and took his hand in hers.

“Come, let’s call for Pansy.”

As they walked Hermione held the book up in the air and let it go—it caught in an invisible, gentle current of magic and calmly floated back to its original location. Lucio stared at it as it floated behind them.

“Mummy, when will I be able to do magic?”

“You’re not far off, actually,” came father’s voice from in front of them—mummy had already stopped. Lucio, who’d still been staring at the book, hadn’t realized, and almost bumped into her. Father chuckled.

“It’s usually around age seven or eight when magical children begin exhibiting their first signs of magic,” father said. “But seeing as you’re so advanced in your studies, I wouldn’t be surprised at all if you started earlier. I’d expect no less, really, considering your mother was showing magic when she was only six, and I when I was five.”

Hermione frowned, surprised that he knew—how? She’d never told him that. Then again, he’d used Legimency on her a few times in the early days of their marriage—he must have been thorough. That, or he had looked for it specifically. She met his knowing glance uneasily.

“Pansy,” he called, and with a nearly silent *pop*, Pansy was now standing with them.

“Yes, my Lord?”

“Watch over Lucio as he plays outside,” Draco said. ‘And bring his broom as well. Be back in time for dinner. No lingering after frogs,’ he added a little sternly. “They make for very boring pets.”

Lucio started beside Hermione. He looked at his father, wide-eyed, a little guilty. How had he known?

“Of course, my Lord,” Pansy said, bowing. She and Lucio left the library together.

Draco held out his hand to Hermione, who took it and let him lead her to his desk. He sat in his chair, pulling her onto his lap, and made no move to hide any of his correspondence.

Hermione reached out tentatively, gaining confidence when he made no move to stop her, and she rifled through the notes and letters, scanning each one quickly.

Nothing she could decode. Some were cryptic messages sent from his followers with nothing but coordinates. A few bills and receipts scattered throughout. An inquiry from a reporter here or there.

His hands were on her waist as she waded through it all.

“The pressing duties of a Lord,” he said, his voice wry. “So much *useless* fucking mail.”

She gave up, put the last roll of parchment down.

“If you don’t like it, why bother with it?” She asked. “You can do what you want.”

“I may not always enjoy it, but if I want to keep control, this job has maintenance of its own and so it’s for the best that I stay on top of things. If I want things done right, I’ll do them myself.” He smirked. “I seem to recall hearing you say that on several occasions in our time at Hogwarts. What, do you not approve of my methods?”

She frowned. How often did he eavesdrop on her during their school days?

“What about the resistance, then? You crow like you’ve got such a tight grip on our world, but there’s still people who know what you are and what you’ve done.”

His hands tightened on her.

“There will always be cracks in the walls rats can squeeze through,” he admitted with a curl of his lip. ‘They can nibble on the concrete foundations I’ve set down, but it will take a *lot* of effort before they get anywhere, and they haven’t got the numbers to make any real damage anyhow.’ His smile was in full now, gleaming. “Yes, they can cling to their pathetic resistance. Let them raise their fists in the air and vow to bring me down. They’ve been doing it for years, and their numbers continue to dwindle, and I’m still here. Not very good for morale, is it?”

He took her hand, kissed it.

“And with your power back, with you by my side, we’ll finish off what’s left of them.”

She said nothing. He stood from his chair, cupped her face in his hands, pressed a kiss to her temple.

“How are you feeling?” He asked.

“Back to normal,” Hermione said.

Whatever normal means.

“I’m glad to hear it,” he said.

Hermione let a brief silence settle between them, a crease between her brows. He sensed that she wanted to ask something and stayed silent.

At last, she found the courage to speak.

“What am I to expect now that I have a Horcrux?”

He released her and walked to the window, his hands in his pockets.

“The results depend on the person, I believe,” he said. “Myself, I’ve noticed nothing out of the ordinary. Increased power is a likelihood, as it happened to me, and I suppose there’s the blood-drinking and the fangs—for you, it might be different.”

“Why does it depend?”

“I was already a monster when I made mine,” Draco said, turning to smile wickedly at her. “I’ve got rage enough inside me that the Horcrux didn’t really add anything new there. I’ve been detached enough for my emotions for a very long time and I think the Horcrux has helped that along nicely, now.”

He came back to her, pressed himself against her from behind, one of her arms in his grip. His other hand reached up to hold her jaw carefully from behind.

“Then there’s you, my little sweetheart, who still struggles with her emotions and is very much tuned into them. You’re maybe a little less human than you were last month, but still human enough that the Horcrux will help you along in letting go. Your anger was a seed

inside of you from the moment we met—it's taken root over the years, grown, and warped. Did you have any regrets or disgust over what you did to me yesterday after you woke?"

"No," she said at once. "You deserved it, and more."

"So I did," he acknowledged. "But there might have been a time when even after you'd done that, you'd have reacted more negatively at your actions rather than brushed them off, regardless of your hatred toward me."

She was frowning.

"Rather, what I also found extremely interesting was your response to cutting my throat. You were so wet, darling—" His teeth grazed against her throat and she flinched. "That's another response you would have been shocked at less than a year ago—don't tell me you haven't taken note of this yourself."

"I have," she said, conflicted. "I told you that I knew something wasn't right. About you, or I... How did you do it?"

"It's a complicated process," he said. "But reduced down to its barest principles, creating a Horcrux centers almost entirely around a blood ritual."

She went still. His tongue brushed against her throat.

"Not all the blood I took from you was for my own consumption, you see," he said. "Greedy as I am, I had to stop myself from bleeding you dry that first time. I put quite a bit of your blood aside to complete the ritual."

"The dagger..."

"Was part of it, as I explained before. The ritual demands blood of the innocent as well of the blood of the Horcrux-bearer, but more of yours was required than that of the prisoner's."

Draco nipped at her throat—she tensed—he held her more tightly.

"You said you had it specially made," she said.

"I did. Borgin runs a good shop, but he's an even better blacksmith and glassworker. He's made quite a few projects for me over the years, and even helped with your stained windows. He's made every single one for every place we've lived in. He's been so pleased to know you've loved them so much, he was happy to create the dagger for free."

All this time, and she'd never once wondered how the windows had come around. She'd never have expected Borgin, of all people, to have been behind them.

"You extorted him," she accused.

"Not at all. I didn't have to. He's devoted to his Lady though he's never even met you. I suppose he'll have to, to hear how much you appreciate his works."

"A letter would suffice," she said, and he chuckled, pressed her firmly into his desk. She could feel his erection prodding against her.

No. Not now.

“What did the dagger do?” She asked. “I could sense magic on it. It was like a living thing. It felt wrong.”

“Besides absorbing some of the prisoner’s blood, it absorbed a piece of her soul as well,” Draco said nonchalantly as though he were reading the weather report. “A necessary component of the ritual. Of course, you had to kill her on your own. It wouldn’t have worked had I done it for you—not that I planned to.”

“So you took blood from me, and you had the dagger, and that was it?”

“Not quite. I put a bit of my own blood in there—not required, but I hoped it might have some favorable results after some testing I did. In short, it helped bond you to me.”

Hermione pulled from his grip, surprised that she’d managed to free herself at all, but he’d let her go willingly. Dread knotted in her stomach.

“What do you mean, *bonded*? How?”

“I’m going to alter the ring, you know,” he said, eyes glinting. “Don’t get your hackles up, sweetling, you’ll still have your magic, but you are my wife and I want the ring back on you.”

At her expression of displeasure, he gave her a sly look.

“If the idea is so unappealing to you, I’ll give you a choice: you can either choose the ring or a gold collar. What would you rather have?”

“The ring, you prat,” she said angrily. “Why even bother giving the illusion of choice? That’s the one thing I ever commended you for, that you never forced me into a collar, even though that suits *this*—” she gestured between themselves violently— “better than a ring.”

“Perhaps it does,” he mused, “but I’ve seen enough collars on other girls in situations similar to yours and find them distasteful. I could collar you in private if that makes you feel better, though.”

“Never!”

“Then there you have it. As my lady and wife, you *will* wear the ring. My claim on you will not be unseen.”

The scar of his bite on the joint of her throat and shoulder throbbed.

“You’ve left enough ‘*claims*’ on me,” she said coolly.

“Debatable,” he said, smiling. “But as I was saying: the ring was useful in the fact that it was charmed to let me know your location as well as alerting me if you were ever in danger. Without those back on you, I’m rather at a disadvantage, and I don’t like to be in that position, as I’m sure you know, so that’s another reason why it must come back on.”

“Why don’t you go ahead and track my sleep, while you’re at it?” She asked, annoyed. “Or better yet, let me track *you* as well so I can avoid you better.”

Draco laughed. “Your fire grows, sweetheart. It warms me to hear it.”

“So if that’s not how we’re bonded, how are we?” She asked.

Like this, he said, but he hadn't moved his mouth, and his voice had come from inside her head.

Hermione froze.

Startling, isn't it? His voice was in her head, as clear as if he were physically speaking. His mouth was shut, his eyes were gleaming still. *Bit of a shock when I first tried it—the wizard I'd linked myself to wasn't pleased, either, but I killed him after I made sure my test worked, so I suppose he's got nothing to complain about, now.*

Horried, Hermione clutched her head in her hands, trying to will his voice away.

"What are you talking about? *Get out of my head!*"

No. Get used to it, sweetheart, because this will be a constant from now on, and I expect we'll both find it to be extremely useful whether you like it or not.

Shaking her head, Hermione flashed her own thought back to him.

You've invaded me enough, but you had to do this, too?

"I can't read *all* your thoughts, if that's what you're thinking," he said aloud, but she felt his presence in her mind like a lover's caress, trying to soothe her agitation. "Not unless I wanted to, and I can only use Legimency for that, remember? This only works with thoughts you intend for me to hear. As if we're sending letters to each other, but much more quickly. What do the Muggles call it, these days? Texting, I think. I can't know your thoughts if you don't hit 'send', metaphorically speaking."

That news was a relief. A very small one.

Trust me, firebird, he said, *this will come to both our benefit. You'll see.*

Her jaw was clenched, but she chose her next move wisely.

Yes, my Lord.

His eyes gleamed in approval.

As for the rest of the ritual, he continued in her head, *there was an incantation to recite—a very long one. Voldemort passed it to me some time before Potter did him in. It was the only concrete clue he gave me on how to make a Horcrux—I had to work out the rest for myself, and that took years and lots of trial and error, and lots of bodies.*

A thought struck her then—she paled. The wizard he'd mentioned earlier, the testing, the home labs and dungeons she had never been allowed near except on one occasion, when the only prisoner had been Neville...

She'd thought all he bothered with in his labs were the love potions and the fertility potions, the vitamin potions he'd forced her to take when she was trying to starve herself, things of that ilk.

How many times had she not been the only prisoner in the manor?

"You don't hunt for sport, do you."

I do, he replied. *But I hunt humans, not creatures.*

All this time—she should have known. When had Draco ever cared about hunting? She had thought it strange the first time he had told her he had taken it up, but rather than dwell on it she had decided it meant she got some peace from him for a brief period of time.

She responded in her mind, probing their new mental connection warily with her magic.

They were your experiments.

His eyes were cool.

Yes.

Martin was one of them, wasn't he?

At this, Draco nodded.

He was meant to be a victim, yes. He was... referred... by an acquaintance. I meant to kill him and then he said he might be of use to me, which most of them say, and is never true, but his acquaintance had told me he was a painter, and I've wanted your likeness taken for a long time. I had him show me his work and I liked it so I spared him. He's the second one I've ever spared.

Poor Martin. It was no wonder he was so afraid of Draco. How had they really met, then? Did Martin even know the fate he'd barely escaped?

How do you do it?

I made a rather elaborate plan with the owner of a tavern in a nearby village, he responded, sounding as if he were proud of himself. Feed some snoops a ghost story and they'll come running to investigate. Keep their disappearances as quiet as possible. Remember that day months ago when I fucked you against a window and there was that intruder at our gate watching?

She remembered too well. *He was one of them.*

Yes. He was the first I spared. He recommended Martin to me.

He wasn't intruding, she accused. The gates are always locked and the path warded. It was no coincidence that they were open when he came. You led him there. You wanted him to watch as you—

She looked away, trying to push back the memory of being raped against the window, which was traumatic enough, and even more so when she'd opened her eyes and seen the horrified stranger down below, staring.

His voice was gentler. *I didn't know he'd arrive so quickly. I punished him for gawking at what's mine.*

She shuddered.

That injury on your leg...

From a Muggle who fought back bravely and still died at my wand. As if a mere knife could bring an end to me.

He gave her a pointed look.

How many?

He didn't blink or break his stare.

Forty-seven.

She shook her head, her mind spinning.

Where?

Far from here. I knew you would have issues with my hobby.

She let out a reflexive laugh of irony and derision.

"That ends now," she said back angrily. "You're never going to hunt humans for sport again."

"Fine," he said, nonplussed. "I did it mainly to get subjects to test on, and it lost its appeal some time ago anyway. It never was much of a challenge."

She looked at him in disgust.

"Yes, poor you, so powerful and so bored you've got no one else to prey on."

"You're the only one who has consistently challenged me since we met," he said, his eyes flashing.

"Yes," she retorted, her voice so sharp it flung out and echoed around the library, "and then you bound and collared me to tip the odds in your favor because you can't stand to lose."

"Wild things sometimes have to be caged to help them reign in their power, sweetling."

*I am **not** wild.*

But her anger was fraying, splintering. Forty-seven victims, both Muggle and magic. The dagger. Her blood. Their new mental bond. Her pulse had picked up, she felt on edge, wanted to rush him and claw at his eyes. He was staring at her, aware of her current struggle, and seemed pleased.

Distantly, she was aware of the bookcases around her vibrating, the books in their hold shifting loudly. Some sheafs of parchment slid off Draco's desk.

Let it go, Hermione, came his voice, soft and insidious and coaxing, into her mind. *Unleash it. Let's see what you're capable of.*

She almost did. Almost. Her body begged for her to find an outlet for that energy and she would have aimed it right at him.

Before she could give in a question darted into her thoughts and she stopped, distracted, her furious magic dissipating almost instantly.

He watched, frowning. Their eyes met.

Hermione gave him a cold look.

"You caged me for your own selfish reasons. Neither of us knew what it would do to my magic, so don't pretend you had a higher plan all this time."

"You're afraid of your magic," he said plainly. "You think it's been corrupted by me."

She ignored him, trying not to appear as shaken as she felt.

"Where is the dagger?"

His eyes glinted again.

"A safe location."

So he wouldn't answer her next questions, then, either.

"What is my Horcrux? And what is yours?"

Draco finally stood and approached her, his expression guarded. He took her face in his hands, bent her low to kiss her deeply.

When they straightened and he broke the kiss, he put a hand lightly around her throat.

"How convenient it would be if I ever told you," he said. "You'll never know. You think I'd give you the information you need to destroy us? Look around the Manor until there's no stone to turn over. Ask me until your face turns blue, little bird, but I'll never tell you."

Martin arrived after lunch to commence Draco's portrait. Hermione and Draco met him in the library.

"I am relieved you are recovered, my Lady," he said after he had bowed to Draco. He bowed to her.

"I am glad to be back," she said simply.

They went to his easel, still perched by the window and the chaise where Hermione had spent so many hours in an uncomfortable pose for her portrait.

"I won't be a constant model," Draco said. "My business keeps me rather busy, as I'm sure you know."

"Of course, my Lord," Martin said. "I wouldn't expect to keep you from your work."

Draco had donned his fanciest robe. Trimmed with gold and cut from the finest material, just like all the clothing the Malfoy family wore it had been made just for him so that it flattered and decorated his form. Even if the silhouette of the robe with its mass of fabric covered most of his muscle, it was fitted enough that anyone could tell that the wearer was in excellent shape, and the cruel coldness of his eyes ensured that he was not afraid to use his strength.

So vain, Hermione thought, staring at the robes absently.

Martin was looking through his drawing box, selecting bits of charcoal to work with. The new blank canvas was stood up on the easel, awaiting the first draft of Martin's next masterpiece.

What would you rather have me wear, sweetling? Came Draco's amused reply. *I'll pose in the nude if you would prefer that better.*

She sniffed indifferently and turned away.

I could have some robes made for you as well if you don't want your portrait to be upstaged, though that's impossible, he added. *But I hate to hide that beautiful body of yours.*

You know I don't care about that sort of thing, she shot back.

Martin, having had no idea of the ongoing conversation in his presence, stood and looked at Draco.

"Will you prefer to sit or stand, my Lord?"

Draco turned to Hermione.

"What do you think, my love?"

Irritation prickled at her. What did it matter?

She was about to say so when her own reminder, occasionally forgotten, popped up:

Play your part. Please him now. Destroy him later.

Although stemming from their earlier talk that day, the possibility of that happening was now slim to none.

She pushed the thought away. Made herself look at Draco, assess him as if *she* were the artist composing a picture. What droll. She'd never felt so silly. But Draco's gaze was heated—it was working.

"Seated," she said at last. "As if he were on his throne."

Draco's brows raised slightly.

"Then it will be so," he said.

"A wonderful idea, my Lady," Martin said. "Will the chaise do, my Lord?"

"Don't bother," Draco said, and with a snap of his fingers, his throne appeared behind him, massive and shining in the daylight. He sat down on it gracefully, placing each arm on its corresponding armrest, spreading his feet on the floor.

So arrogant. So dominant. Hermione wanted to roll her eyes.

Of course you would get the more comfortable pose, she thought to him. *I'd dearly like to see you in the one you set for me.*

She felt his chuckle rather than heard it.

Anything to please my Lady, he responded.

"Excellent. If you keep as still as you can, my Lord, I can get a sketch done quickly and if it meets your approval I may even get to painting today," Martin said. "Unless you would rather hold the painting off for tomorrow."

"The sooner the better," Draco said.

I want to go check on Lucio, Hermione said.

Go to him, then, Draco said. But I want you back when you're free again. I think I'll die of boredom otherwise.

I wonder what that feels like, she said, and left the room.

Outside, the sun was blazing and there was a strong breeze blowing whenever it felt like it. She was sweating within seconds of stepping outside.

Her gown fluttered in the wind. Her dress was white. Draco had picked it out for her that morning.

The sight of her flapping skirts and the feel of the wind on her body brought back a memory half-repressed—her first suicide attempt, up on the balcony of their first house.

Disoriented, she shook her head, but the image remained. There had been spots of blood on the skirt of that other dress from the remnants of Draco's brutal assault the night before. She remembered the overwhelming fear that had almost paralyzed her at every step up to that balcony, the fear that her plan would break at any second and he would catch her.

Hermione reached down, bunched the excess material in her hands, and set to walking, sweat rolling down her back and scalp, squinting fiercely in the light. She could barely make out Lucio and Pansy over by the pond, seated at the base of a large oak tree.

She almost tripped three times on her way there. She got an idea.

If you won't let me Apparate, she thought, you could at least give me one bloody pair of jeans.

His reply was instant.

You are a Lady, not a common Muggle. Besides, why would I get rid of your dresses and the easy access they give me to you?

She sent back a viciously worded reply that went unanswered but she felt his mirth again. Did this mean he could sense her emotions now, too?

She was a fair distance from the Manor now. Hermione stopped, turned back to face it, sick curiosity coiling inside her.

Was there a distance limit to this connection? If she were a mile away, could he still hear her? What about in another province, country?

I'll find out soon enough.

By then she had almost reached Lucio and Pansy, who had noticed her. Lucio ran to greet her.

"Hello mummy!" He said, wrapping his arms around her legs in a hug.

"Hello, my love," she said, her heart softening.

"We've got ice-water," Pansy said. "Will you join us?"

"Gladly," Hermione said, and sank down to the floor in a manner that would beg for Draco's reprimand. She took the glass of water Pansy offered her and took a grateful drink. "Thank you."

"I caught a frog, mummy!" Lucio said proudly.

"You did! Where is it?"

"It jumped away," Lucio said, frowning. "They're so quick."

"You can try again," Pansy reminded him.

"No, I'm tired," he said, and sat back down.

"Where is my Lord?" Pansy asked.

"With Martin, having his portrait taken."

"I see. Yours came out beautifully," Pansy said.

"I don't know why he's bothering with paintings," Hermione said. "He's got a camera, why not stick with it? Take a picture once and you're finished! No need to sit about in a chair for ages."

I hate when he takes photographs of me, but I'd sooner endure that again than posing for what feels like another lifetime.

"It did look rather boring," Pansy said sympathetically. "But it's a tradition in Pureblood families—especially one as prestigious and old as the Malfoys. My parents had their portraits done when I was little. My mum couldn't sit still for the life of her so it's no wonder her portrait didn't look like her at all."

Hermione smiled.

"Maybe if I'd moved around more, Martin would have gotten impatient and quit."

Not that Draco allows anyone to quit on him.

Pansy had the same thought, judging by her expression.

"I wonder if he'll have them animated," Hermione said. "I've been thinking about that a lot."

"I don't see why he wouldn't," Pansy replied slowly. "It's rather unusual to leave a portrait unanimated."

"Do you know how it's done?" Hermione asked, turning to her suddenly, slightly afraid.

"There is a spell cast by the maker, and I think the subject has to participate in order for their essence to translate through and fully animate the painting. Somebody told me once blood is involved."

Hermione frowned.

Blood, blood, blood. It keeps crawling up. I'll drown in it.

He probably would have them animated. Probably not even because he cared that much about tradition—but she sensed it was another form of control over her, that he'd have her double laid out on canvas in his office for his pleasure to watch and gloat over. She wouldn't put it past him to have the other portraits placed around the manor so they could watch over her.

She shook the thought away.

"How are you feeling?" Pansy asked.

"Better."

In the days since her waking, Draco had tended to her very carefully, making sure she was eating all her meals and getting exercise. Under other circumstances, any wife would have been pleased by the attentions and care. Hermione knew it was partly to make sure the physical effects of her coma would not be everlasting.

He's got to make sure his brood mare is healthy before she's ready to go again.

She felt like smashing something.

She agreed that she did feel weaker physically since she had awoken, and wanted to get back to the state she had been in previously, but every time he bid her take a vitamin supplement potion, summoned Healer Erik for another checkup, or took her for a walk around the garden, she felt he was inwardly calculating the day he could deem her sufficiently recovered enough to begin trying to impregnate her again, and it left a sour taste on her tongue.

And what can I do to stop it? He won't accept any more excuses.

The topic of another child was by no means new to her—he had been pressing it for the better part of a year and she had fought him every time, making excuses, demanding to have control over her body, and it had all bought her some time, but Draco's will was always inevitable.

What good does having my magic back do me if I still can't protect myself from him?

Hopelessness settled like a weighted blanket around her, heavy, stiff, almost smothering.

Pansy had picked up a twig from the ground and snapped it in two. She had recognized Hermione's pained and distant stare and had thought it best to keep quiet until she reemerged. It took a minute, but when Hermione's eyes finally cleared, Pansy reached over and rubbed her back gently. Hermione twitched but didn't jump—she turned to Pansy as if she had forgotten she was even there.

"Are you hungry?" Pansy asked quietly.

Hermione shook her head.

"How are you lately?" She asked Pansy, wanting desperately to turn the conversation away from herself. "We haven't spoken much in the past week."

"Same as always," was Pansy's reply. "Nothing to complain about."

Nothing that can be complained about, more likely.

She looked off in the direction Lucio stood, poking at something in the ground with a stick, and smiled affectionately.

“Would you be able to say if you are unhappy if you were?” Hermione asked carefully.

“Yes, I think so,” Pansy replied, too-casually glancing around the area. ‘But I speak with care so that my words may not be misconstrued as complaints.’ She shrugged. “My family is all gone and I had the barest semblance of a career before I came to work here. I’m glad to have friends, at the very least.”

Hermione touched her hand and smiled.

“I am, too. I was extremely lonely until you and Lucio came along. I know we’re all trapped, but it helps not being alone.”

Pansy gave a short laugh. “A sad consolation, isn’t it? We’re all miserable together.”

They embraced.

“Did Draco do or say anything to Lucio when I wasn’t there?” Hermione asked when they pulled apart. “He seems different, now. Slightly on edge. Almost resentful, but only toward Draco.”

Pansy sighed. “I didn’t hear all of it because there’s only so much I can make out through the door, but over dinner one night, Draco told Lucio everything you had told him was true, and that he’s forbidden from meddling. Lucio wanted to protect you, you see. He told Draco to leave you alone.”

Hermione’s lips pressed together, her eyes suddenly wet.

“He’s frightened of him, now.”

I thought I would have felt happy to know Lucio knew the truth.

“He likely feels powerless,” Pansy said. “Now that he knows you are unhappy and that my Lord hurts you, and that he can do nothing. Draco isn’t bothered by it. He doesn’t have to pretend anymore. That was his main issue. When he came out of that room after they had that talk, he seemed very satisfied.”

“Was he ever a good father?” Hermione asked bitterly. “Or was he only playing at one when the deception was still ongoing?”

“I believe he cares for Lucio as much as someone in his state can,” Pansy said, picking her words very carefully. “He’s his son. His resemblance to the both of you is very strong. I couldn’t ever see him hurting or abandoning him.”

Hermione looked at the sky. “I’m not sure I agree.”

Pansy wanted to ask, but Hermione looked away, and they sat in silence for a while. Pansy yawned and rubbed at her back.

“Take a nap,” Hermione said. “I know you’re tired.”

Pansy looked troubled. She had kept her uniform on though the heat was sweltering—Hermione supposed Draco would get very cross if he came across them and found her with

her robe off.

"I'm not tired, my Lady," she said quickly, "I wouldn't dare sleep while on duty."

"It's okay," Hermione said. "I'll watch Lucio."

"And if my Lord comes?"

Hermione shook her head. "Then I'll tell him I gave you a well-deserved break. Really, don't fret."

"Thank you, my Lady."

Still slightly apprehensive, Pansy laid down beside her and closed her eyes. Hermione's troubled thoughts continued to brew.

He may want more children badly, but if my life was on the line and he had to pick between our offspring and I, he wouldn't think twice.

Which is why we've got to get out. He may care for Lucio, but he doesn't love him.

She thought of Lucius suddenly. She had barely known him. Draco never spoke fondly of him, and he'd said very little of his mother after she had passed. What little he had divulged of his childhood to her, it seemed dark and sterile of much emotion except for the love his mother had showered on him. And how often had that been? If what Draco had said was true, his father hadn't much approved of Narcissa doting on Draco, that he had made sure that Draco had been indoctrinated into Voldemort and the Death Eater's culture from a young age to harden him. Judging by the way Draco insisted that Lucio not be over-coddled, that he be stripped of his innocence by pulling back the curtain on their grotesque relationship, it seemed he was intent on following his father's rules of raising a son.

Was this really how their relationship was with him? Was that why he turned so foul?

Lucius had been needlessly kind to her in the very few times they had spoken since her captivity. She had been *grateful* for it, for the secret sympathy of a man whose legend and cruelty had oft been spoken of within the Order.

Was he an abuser, too? Is that where you learned your love language from, husband?

She startled, almost clapping her hand to her mouth, her heart skipping a beat.

She had been thinking to herself, but with that last question directed at Draco, had it actually sent?

I hate this, I hate this, why would he do this to me? Can I... unsend it?

What a ridiculous thought. She felt silly for even thinking it.

Hermione waited tensely for a reply but after a moment, nothing came. She left herself calm down slowly, but still felt on edge. Had he heard it, then? Had she angered him?

Pansy, woken by Hermione's movement, stirred.

"What's wrong?"

“Nothing,” Hermione said quickly. She didn’t know if she had the energy to explain Draco’s latest cruel innovation.

Pansy folded her hands under her head. Hermione could see Lucio flying his broom around the perimeter of the pond, occasionally reaching down to sweep his hand through some tall grass. She watched anxiously, fearing he might lose grip and tumble down, but he was a sure flier and never wavered. Pride slowly began to overtake her worry.

“I had a dream the other night,” Pansy said after a moment. “I saw my mum again. She was alive and visiting me at Hogwarts.”

“What happened?” Hermione asked.

“Nothing much, really. I told her everything that’s happened since I last saw her. I was just a kid when she died—it felt like we spoke for days. She barely said anything, though.”

“Why do you think?”

Pansy stared up at the sky, her hands folded on her sternum. Hermione kept a watchful eye on Lucio, who had flown over to a flowerbed, staring at a bee that hovered over a rose.

“I don’t know,” Pansy said with a sigh. “Maybe I just wanted to get all that stuff off my chest and needed someone to listen.”

“If you ever need a break or a vacation, of some sort,” Hermione said, frowning, “I could try to arrange it. You’ve been faithful and of great help here. I don’t see why it can’t be a possibility.”

Pansy shook her head. “You are too kind, my Lady, but I’m wanted here too often to leave for even a short period of time, even if my Lord allows it.” She looked away. “Time off wasn’t really mentioned in my contract when I signed on, you see. I didn’t expect it, either. Despite my work here, I still have time for myself, and that’s enough.”

Hermione wasn’t sure she was convinced.

“As much as I love your friendship, I hate that you’ve been involved in all this,” Hermione replied softly. She reached up to wipe sweat from her neck.

“It was my own choice to work here,” Pansy reminded her. ‘Even if I didn’t know. The thought of taking a break is nice, but I honestly think I would be more anxious outside of the manor. I would worry about you and Lucio. When I saw your body on the bed, I thought he’d finally killed you. He kept me from helping you, again.’ She shook her head. “I *need* to be here. Even if I can’t help you, I have to be here. Maybe I can calm him down next time.”

“Pansy,” Hermione pleaded, her face pained. “You can’t protect me. Please don’t take that burden on yourself. Everyone who’s tried has failed and *died*. He didn’t so much as blink when I killed Blaise. He’d kill you, and find another to take your place here.”

“Then what good am I?” Pansy asked, looking lost. Perspiration trickled down her temples. “I’m to look after you every day, to heal and dress and watch you but I can’t so much as interfere when he hurts you or almost kills you. What use is my role here if I can’t save you?”

A strong gust of wind swept through them. Hermione leaned into it gratefully, gripped Pansy's arm.

"Nobody can save me."

It took so long for that to finally stick in my head. I was vain enough to hope he was wrong, but I was the mistaken one.

"He doesn't mean to kill me."

What a thing to say out loud.

"Then what was last time?" Pansy asked bitterly.

"An accident. Neither of us knew what would happen with the return of my magic. I saw how frightened he was as I was going under. There was regret on his face. Do you know how rarely I get to see that from him?"

Probably never. Pansy shook her head.

"Of course, it was still his fault. Tampering with someone else's magic for nearly a decade is bound to cause some sort of problem. And because he thought I was at risk of dying, he made sure I can't anymore."

Pansy sighed, looking bleak.

"He made your Horcrux, then." She bit her lip. "I *knew* he was up to something. I felt it all over the manor. That was also why I tried to keep him away from you. When he finally let me tend to you I saw the punctures... He went from being so angry and so agitated to being so calm after a few days... I knew he knew something I didn't."

"He's always one step ahead." Hermione looked down at her hands and thought of her talons, sharp and deadly. "So you needn't worry about me now. The only one you should truly be worried about is Lucio. Draco is only concerned with me, so for the next instances, stay with Lucio. Make sure he doesn't see or hear and that he's okay. I'll try to take care of myself in the meanwhile."

Pansy's eyes were troubled.

"If you wish it, my Lady."

They lapsed into another silence. The wind began to strengthen. Clouds stretched over the sky, muddling the day's brightness.

"What would you do if you could get out?" Hermione asked, staring at the rippling pond. She could hear Lucio humming to himself cheerfully as he dipped his toes in the water. His face was flushed from the heat.

"I'd go back to my studies in Germany," Pansy said wistfully. "I miss it. The traveling, the food. I didn't have friends at the time but I enjoyed my time there, learning about medieval architecture. The Muggle alcohol there was quite good, too."

Hermione laughed softly.

"Now you. What would you do if you were free?" Pansy asked.

Hermione hesitated.

"I try not to think about it too much. It hurts when I do. It's nigh impossible, at this point."

"I understand," Pansy said. "But hypothetically? If a genie granted your wish?"

Hermione sighed.

"I'd track down my parents. I'd introduce them to Lucio. I would go about seeing if there's any way I could get a divorce. I would finish my studies and move somewhere no-one could find me. Except you," she said. "You would always be welcome wherever I go."

"I'm honored."

Lucio, bored now, came back to them and sat down on the grass heavily.

"I'm hungry," he said.

Pansy looked at her watch. "Well, we have twenty minutes until dinner. Do you think you can wait?"

Lucio made a face. "Maybe. Could I have a snack?"

Pansy looked at Hermione.

"Yes," she said, smiling. "A small one, though."

"Okay!" Lucio said and sprang up to his feet again. He went to Pansy, who was already standing, and tugged on her sleeve to hurry her.

"You're staying outside?" Pansy asked.

"Just for a little bit," Hermione replied. "I'll see you both at dinner. Lucio, don't forget to wash up."

"Yes, mummy," Lucio said.

She watched them go, and when she was finally alone she let herself sink a little deeper into the earth, let her breath come out long and slow.

The wind had died down again by now. Sweat crawled down her skin. Hermione shifted slightly to make herself more comfortable and closed her eyes, put her hands on her stomach.

She had a Horcrux now. What had it done to her? What could it do? How did it manifest? All at once or slowly over time? Was it a malevolent energy that lived inside her now? Or a physical mass, like a tumor or some other sort of sickness that was now bound to her?

Harry had been an unwitting Horcrux for most of his short life. What signs had there been that they had overlooked despite the Parseltongue and the connected dream/visions, the transfer of extreme emotions? What else might he have told her that could help her now? The problem was that she was not a Horcrux, but that she had one.

Could she expect that from her bond to Draco, now?

And I don't even know what or where it is.

Despair choked her throat. She covered her eyes.

Is it reversible?

There was a longing in her to run to the library and look for answers but she knew she would find none. The existence of a book detailing everything one needed to know about making a Horcrux and suffering its effects was at zero, if Draco could be believed. He was a manipulator and a liar, but she believed him when he'd said he'd had to figure it out himself from the scant information Voldemort had given him. Even Harry and Dumbledore had had very limited information, and the Hogwarts library had proven itself obdurate in aiding her search for answers as well.

She would have to find out on her own.

She pictured it like a black mass inside of her somewhere in her body. Lodged inside her ribs, a sickly film around her heart, perhaps—in her bloodstream, even, multiplying rapidly. Fear spiked within her. Draco had been right—she had attacked him so easily and viciously the previous day and had not for one second balked as she'd gutted him. Years ago it absolutely would have affected her and despite her hatred of him, she was not sure she would have actually exacted some modicum of her revenge in that particular manner.

Pain changes people, I guess.

And she'd had it doled out to her in spades.

A memory resurfaced.

She was back in the Hogwarts library. It was evening and her dress was wrinkled and torn, her skin crawling from the assault she had just barely managed to escape from. She was panting with fear, her skin crawling from his touch, the things he'd said to her. The Yule Ball continued merrily on downstairs in the Great Hall, Cormac McLaggen was in McGonagall's office getting the scolding of his life, and she was there trapped with the last person in the world she wanted to be alone with.

Draco, staring at her with hooded eyes, clear and glazed with lust.

And resentment.

That was when the true nature of his obsession came to light. Every jagged piece, every hint and suspicion from the past months had come together into a dangerous mosaic. The truth that she had scarcely allowed herself to think about, much less believe.

"By the second kiss, you'd already infected me," he'd told her bitterly.

As if she had been the one with the aim to ensnare him all along. As if he'd had no choice but to follow his hideous obsession, rather than let her be. As if it were some force beyond his control.

She hadn't understood then. Now, it was different.

Tit for tat, she thought. I 'infected' him, albeit unknowingly, and he corrupts me in turn. Will that satisfy him at last?

No. That was a certainty.

A bird sang somewhere from deeper in the garden. She listened to it, picturing with sorrow all the lives her husband had extinguished at the expense of his sadistic hunting trips. He had gone on many hunting trips over the past years, but whether he had called them such on forty-seven separate occasions eluded her. He did not like to leave the Manor too frequently for long periods of time—this had to mean he sometimes hunted more than one at once.

How had he done it? How had he preferred to kill them? Quickly, or slowly? With or without magic? She remembered that long slash on his thigh from a while ago—sometimes he would have minor bruises here and there—she had always supposed he had gotten those through his training sessions—and now realized he might have considered that a form of training.

Her stomach turned.

And Martin—had he known he was slated to be Draco's forty-eighth hunting victim? Hadn't he ever wondered how odd it was the suddenly this cruel, mysterious Lord appeared from nowhere into his life?

Sweetheart, came Draco's seductive drawl suddenly into her head. Still unused to it, Hermione jumped violently, flinching into the ground. *I'm extremely bored. Come warm my lap and brighten my day, won't you?*

Her eyes opened. The sun was well into its descent. The air had grown mercifully cooler.

Entertain yourself, she thought, annoyed, her heart still pounding.

But despite their casual tone, his words held the authority of a command behind them that she could not ignore. She rose unhappily, brushed off her skirts, and set back for the Manor. Lucio and Pansy must be washing up by now for dinner. That meant Martin's session with Draco was almost over.

That I have, he answered, and she could picture his wicked smile. *I've thought in explicit detail how I'm going to have you later, once Martin is gone... Remember the first time you said that to me, back at school? You probably don't. But if you knew how many times I came to the thought of you during that year, you'd see how well I interpreted your words.*

He was right, she didn't remember. How long ago had that been?

Will Martin have included your erection in the portrait when it's finished? She wondered.

He laughed. *I can control myself, sweetling. If that fails, a simple charm helps hide it. Though you sitting on it would hide it best.*

She snorted. *Is sex all you ever think about?*

Well, when I've got the smartest, strongest, most beautiful wife in the world, it can't be helped, can it? I've told you as much, Hermione. When you came along, I turned into a beast. Everything about you drives me wild.

By now she was inside, coming along the corridor, reluctantly approaching the library. She stopped at the door.

Would you ever let Pansy take a holiday?

No, he said. *Well, perhaps. She's proved immensely valuable here, but I can't spare her when there's you and Lucio to look after. Has she said she wants a holiday?*

No, Hermione replied. *I was just wondering. She's been loyal enough that I'm sure you can trust her to take some time off. Did you not think serving you doesn't take a toll on one's health?*

Don't give her any ideas, Draco said. *I pay her very well for her time and troubles.*

Well I think she's earned it, Hermione replied. *And I can take care of myself and Lucio, you know.*

There was no reply.

She entered the library and found Draco still on his throne, imperially cold and staring intently at Martin, who was sweating as he drew on the life-size canvas.

"Ah, what a pleasant surprise, my love," Draco said, not even turning to face her, acting as if he had not summoned her. He gave her a dazzling smile. "Have you come to claim me for dinner?"

"It's almost time," she said, stopping beside the throne. His hand, still on the armrest, rolled over to expose his palm. She put her hand in it and he held it gently. "Martin, you are welcome to stay and join us."

Martin's face peered out at them from behind the canvas.

"I'm afraid I cannot, my Lady, but I thank you for the invitation."

I don't blame you, she thought.

"Then that concludes today's session," Draco said. His eyes were heated as he glanced at Hermione. "I'm starved."

"As you wish, my Lord," Martin said. "Would you like to take a look?"

Draco rose from the throne, adjusted his robes.

"By now I have enough faith in your ability," he said, but still strode to peruse the face of the canvas, pulling Hermione with him, still joined by the hand.

Again, Hermione was struck by the drawing. It was only a preliminary sketch but the level of the detail and skill in it still blew her away. Draco's form in the throne was languidly arrogant and commanding, his stare affixed and challenging the viewer.

It was on the same scale as her own portrait so they matched if Draco decided he wanted them placed together, and he, like her, had been placed in the same central composition, but whereas Hermione had been at an angle, he faced it point-blank.

The effect was unnervingly impressive. Hermione had no doubt that whichever room this portrait would be placed, she would feel its eyes on her wherever she went in the room. No doubt it was the effect Draco wanted.

"Well done," Draco said. "It seems almost a shame to paint over it despite it being half-rendered."

"If you would like drawings I may do those as well," Martin said, bowing. "I am at your service, my Lord."

"Tempting," Draco said, and his eyes flickered to Hermione. She felt the slither of his thought as it entered her mind and fought the instinct to cringe.

How do you feel about posing in the nude, sweetling? Something tells me you would hate it, but those drawings would be masterpieces with such a beautiful subject.

She didn't answer him.

"Tomorrow, you'll come back at the same time," Draco said to Martin.

"Yes, my Lord. I will begin painting a study of your face and form to capture it as a reference so you need not sit for me for longer than necessary."

"Good," Draco said. "Pansy will see you out. We'll expect you tomorrow."

"Have a good evening, my Lord and Lady," Martin said, bowing, and they took their leave.

Draco's arm snaked around her waist as they walked to the dining room.

"I can see why you were so impatient to get your portrait over with as quickly as possible," he remarked. "My patience was tried for every second of it."

"Where are you going to put these when they're done?" Hermione asked..

"I haven't decided yet," Draco said. "I'll make up my mind once the last one is finished."

"I suppose I don't have any say in where mine goes," she said stiffly.

"I knew from the start where that one belongs," he said, grinning. "That one's for my eyes only. It'll be in the adjunct room to my study."

She wouldn't argue with that.

Better there than out in the open for everyone to gawk at.

"Longbottom's been dancing circles around Diagon Alley," he said suddenly. "Taunting my men, barely slipping capture each time. Any idea what that's about?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "When I saw him at the Burrow, I asked him to draw your attention somewhere else to keep you busy."

He held her gaze for a moment, expressionless.

"Yes, I thought as much."

Traitor, the voice inside her whispered.

You saw it already in my memories, she wanted to accuse. *You knew, why throw it in my face again?*

"He always comes in disguise but takes it off just long enough to be recognized and targeted, then slips another on and flees," Draco continued. "If you both wanted my attention, sweetheart, you've got it. But you're coming with me when we'll draw him out for good this time."

Hermione looked up at him, frowning.

"My men will inform me the second he next appears in Diagon Alley," he said. "We've got a little trap set up. Should he fall for it, you will be coming with me to have a little talk with him. Did you want me far away so you could try to find a way out? I think not. You wouldn't have any luck anyhow. No, I think it's time Longbottom sees just how much more you've become involved in my court."

"It won't surprise him, if that's what you're aiming for," Hermione said resentfully. "I already told him what I'd done."

"I know that, too, sweetheart. But seeing it in action is entirely different, isn't it? He might have convinced himself that I'd Imperiused you to drive that dagger into that woman's heart. But that was all you, lovely murderess."

"You knew I would do it," Hermione hissed. "You love giving me the illusion of choice. You knew I'd rather kill her than condemn her to be Crabbe's sex slave. You did that on purpose to get what you wanted."

"I did," he said, his eyes boring into hers. "But regardless of whether I had given you that choice or not, you would have killed her, because you are *mine* and you will do what I demand."

She looked away. He stopped, forcing her to stop as well, and reached out to turn her face back to him.

"Are you *still* fighting me?" He breathed against her cheek, his voice deceptively gentle.

"No, my Lord." Her voice was slightly hoarse.

He assessed her, hardly blinking.

"I understand, actually," he said at last. "It's been your first response, your instinct for all these years. It must not be easy to forget that. So I'll play along if you do your part, firebird. When I order you to burn them, you'll do it."

"He was my friend," she said, her voice breaking.

"Blaise was *my* friend," his voice was emotionless. "My closest friend for many years until he betrayed me. Did you see me cry when you killed him?"

"Neville never betrayed me," she hissed, fists clenching. "And Blaise was only trying to make sure I was safe. He knew you were mental. He at least felt *sorry* for his role in what happened to me. He was doing the right thing!"

"And in doing so he broke my trust, Hermione," Draco said. "So he had to die. As for Longbottom, don't be so sure."

"What are you talking about?" Hermione asked, suspicion needling at her. She felt cold suddenly.

Draco sighed, stepped closer to brush her cheek with one cold hand.

"Let Longbottom go," he said simply. "It's high time you did. How can you be with me and fight for my side when you still cling to him?"

She hesitated, torn. He forced her to look into his eyes.

“Let him go,” he repeated. “Let them all go. You’ve been reborn with the Horcrux, sweetling. Take the gift it’s offering you. Can’t you feel it?”

Hermione closed her eyes. He shook her gently, and she opened them again. His eyes were intent, like fire trapped in ice.

“You pinned your last hopes on Longbottom—do you really think he can save you, at this point?”

“I don’t care if he can’t save me,” she replied, agitated. “I just wanted him to save Lucio.”

“So you thought they would protect the spawn of the very wizard they’ve been working to destroy for years?” He chuckled. “Sweetheart, they’d gut him as soon as they’d get their hands on him.”

She flared. “They’d *never*.”

“And how do you know that? Longbottom’s morals have loosened considerably since you last really knew him. His loyalty was to *you*, not the son you created with the Dark Lord.”

“Show me proof. How do I know you’re not manipulating me?”

“You can ask him yourself when you see him next. Our friend George isn’t the only one who’s been changed by the war,” Draco said. “Has he told you exactly what he’s done in service to me?”

“No,” Hermione said. “He just said he was a spy.”

Draco’s expression was almost one of pity.

“You’ll have to wait to hear it until he comes back, then.”

She stared at him distrustfully.

He kissed her, his lips pushing urgently on hers, backing her into the wall. Hermione could only cling to his lapels as he ravaged her mouth.

Let him go, he was saying again. His tongue invaded her mouth. His hands were everywhere. *You can’t be who you were meant to be if you keep clinging to ghosts.*

What am I meant to be? She asked scornfully.

His teeth clamped down on her bottom lip.

Hellfire.

She twisted in pain, blood smearing between their mouths.

When he pulled back, they were both panting. His eyes were clear and fevered, his lips red and wet. She felt her own blood dripping from her chin. Her lip smarted and ached badly, but she felt almost disconnected from it after the initial pain.

Draco reached out again, his index and middle fingers caressing her lower lip, healing it. The blood vanished. The pain receded.

When he spoke, his voice was ragged with want.

“What does the past matter when you’ve got so much future to work with?”

Please him now. Destroy him later.

“You’re right,” she said.

She felt his minute surprise in the way he cocked his head slightly as if he had expected her to argue.

“Sometimes I hate you for it.”

He instantly recognized his own words from her mouth and smiled. He took her hand and they resumed walking.

She thought of Neville the last time she had seen him. How tightly he had hugged her. His tears of relief. His promise.

Did she want to hear whatever he’d done that Draco had alluded to? No. Yes. Would it ultimately change the decision she had just made?

No.

She had picked a side. There were no blurred lines here. She could not toast Draco and his followers and claim herself a victim, could not murder an innocent prisoner of war and pretend there was still a chance for salvation. That meter had run out long ago, and she had been naive to hold on to nothing but fumes.

Pain changed people. War changed people. She had seen it in George. She had seen it in herself.

It had inevitably changed Neville, too. The extent to which she was yet to hear, as with George, but she knew already it would change her view of them permanently. And now came the determination to steel herself to whatever it would be, because it would surely dismay and shock her.

She envied Draco for his lack of empathy, his ability to feel nothing.

His face above hers, pale and worried, flashed across her mind’s eye.

Well, almost nothing.

What peace that must be. No wonder he was so good at being a monster.

She thought of Neville, pored over some of her favorite memories from when they had worked together at Hogwarts as Head Boy and Girl.

Once she would have felt an acute pain from the memories, and it was still there now, but dulled.

Curious, she grasped for the pain. Tried to wrench it back open.

It resisted.

So this was it. The transformation was well underway.

She should have felt terrified.

Instead, she felt along its jagged edge, wondering how much else it might take.

Everything, a new voice whispered.

She frowned, actually alarmed. The voice was not of her active consciousness. Terrifyingly, it sounded almost like her own, but distorted. Was Draco behind this? Or was this the voice of her Horcrux?

I'll take everything, delicious one, and I'll make you anew.

They had reached the dining room. Draco had paused with his hand on the doorknob, watching her closely.

Did he know what was happening? Something told her he did.

Had he gone through the same thing? Had he heard a voice, too? Had it also sounded like himself?

She felt unsteady. Displaced.

Sensing her distress, Draco kept her stare and inclined his head as if reassuring her.

Then came his voice in her head.

It's alright, he said. *I'll guide you through this.*

She took a step forward, afraid and curious as to if the voice would come forward again.

Let it burn you, sweetling, Draco was saying. *Let it burn your past away. Take these last steps to take your first.*

Conflicted, she breached the gap between them and he pressed his forehead to hers briefly, closing his eyes, his lips parted—not seeking a kiss but savoring the moment, as if he had waited for this for a very long time.

They pulled apart after a moment and entered the dining room together.

Lucio had his back to them but Pansy was standing on the opposite side of the table facing the door, and as they approached them Pansy's eyes locked with Hermione's, and she knew she had seen everything.

Pansy gave a minute raise of her brows as if inquiring she were ok.

Hermione made herself nod. Draco had pulled out her chair for her and she sat, then he did.

She had no appetite but made herself eat under Draco's close watch.

She wondered if that fire was still burning away at her now, why she couldn't feel it actively as it changed her.

At least let me be aware of my ruin so I may mourn it.

But she had been mourning all this time, before the construction of her Horcrux. What was there left to grieve? She had cried over her past self, over her past life, her taken innocence,

too many times to count.

Would you spend the rest of your life in mourning, delicious one? Or would you seize the power I offer, and this time be the one who takes?

The voice made her freeze—it sped her heart, and yet its allure had to be acknowledged.

I have always been powerful, Hermione said to it. She kept her eyes on her plate, on the meal she had only half-finished. Her knife was cold in her hand.

Oh yes, the voice agreed silkily. *Until trauma in the form of your husband took it from you. Now you have it back. What would you do with it?*

How many more turns could her life take? She had started the day with her own voice being the sole occupant of her thoughts. Then came the addition of Draco's. Now she was speaking to another.

This is how madness starts, she thought to herself distantly.

By then the voice had faded. She let out a silent, shaky sigh and took a drink. Draco was distracted, asking Lucio about what he had done while he had played outside. Lucio engaged, but his interaction with his father was much less animated and affectionate than it had been previously.

Hermione pushed away her plate, the voice's question still rising in her head.

After dinner Draco escorted her to the bedroom, his hand on the small of her back. They walked in silence but when the door had closed behind them, his voice emerged in her head, rising above her train of thought.

Take that dress off for me, sweetheart.

She closed her eyes and did it—he circled her, his eyes ravenous.

She opened her eyes and found him in front of her, only a whisper away, his fingers trailing over the delicate lace of her lingerie. Her breaths were shallow.

This too, he said, but his hand at her bra tapped at the joining between the cups and it split, fell apart—her breasts spilled out.

Take off the rest.

She obeyed, bending down to undo her garter belt and slip out of it, then carefully pulled her underwear down and off.

He stared.

She straightened, met his eye.

He turned, went to the armchair by the fireplace and sat down, his legs spread.

Her stomach sank.

His eyes glowed from their proximity to the fire's light.

Come to me, wife.

She did so, raging internally, her face blank. When she had reached the chair she anticipated his next order and before he could utter it, knelt down before him.

Don't worry, sweetling, he reassured her. You'll get your turn, and I'll take my time, but this was all I could think about this morning.

She reached up, brushed his robe aside, undid his trousers and freed his erection from it. She scooted closer to the chair and his hands wove into her hair as she closed her mouth around him.

Draco moaned. His hands pushed her head gently down on as much of him as she could manage until she braced her hands on his thighs and squeezed. He stopped, let her tongue roam. He held most of her hair in his fist, keeping it from her face.

"What do you think Martin's reaction would be if I had you like this at our next session?" He asked, chuckling, then cut off with a moan.

Don't you dare, she replied.

He made a gesture with his fingers and she jolted in surprise as an invisible hand rubbed at her intimately.

Don't be afraid, he said. That's for you to help you warm up, sweetling. I want you soaking and ready when it's your turn.

She was clearly uncomfortable with it—Draco paid it no mind. She would change her mind soon enough. And if she didn't, it didn't matter.

She lowered her mouth to him again. That silky wetness, the heat of that mouth—his eyes fluttered shut as she pulled back to breathe, let her lips tease at his head. She shifted anxiously as the invisible hand at her vulva continued to tease and rub, gently stroking her. Anything he pictured it doing, it followed. He sent it to her clit, and she gasped as the invisible hand began to coax it. Lust pulled taut inside him like a bowstring. His hand tightened in her hair and hips pushed up—she gagged.

You're a wonder, Hermione, he said, his voice laced with pleasure. You perfect witch.

She paused.

Would you still think that if I bit down right now? Her tone was casual but menacing. It only made him harder. The tip of her tongue traced him slowly—Draco pushed up again and she suppressed her gag, withdrew from him to take in a breath.

His lids were lowered and his clear eyes glazed. His cock was glistening from her mouth. Hermione took him back in, her hand pumping him as she bobbed her head up and down on it, fighting the urge to press her bum backwards more firmly into the touch of the invisible hand, which by now had her successfully wet. She felt herself throb with need.

I think I would, he said. His moan filled her head. I've bitten you enough—it's only fair. But mind, sweetheart, I'd rather you do it somewhere else. You said you'd never miss any part of me, but I don't think Potter could ever fuck you half as well as I can, nor could anyone else.

If this is the only part of our demented marriage you eventually came to not entirely hate, why get rid of it?

The finger at her clit applied more pressure—she bucked and barely managed to quiet her moan but Draco felt its brief vibration against his cock and hissed. He made the hand increase its speed at her clit, and suddenly there was another at her entrance, impatiently sliding inside her. Hermione arched her back, and this time couldn't hold back her moan as the fingers slowly began to fuck her.

That's right, he crowed. Let me fill you. You're so deliciously wet, Hermione. I should have tried this sooner—I didn't know my wonderful wife liked being filled from both ends. How you continue to surprise me, wife.

If she felt any shame she masked it well, choosing not to reply.

Do you like my fingers inside you? He asked. *Or would you rather have my cock between your legs?*

Her answer came in a choked moan, quivering briefly as he paid attention to a spot that he knew she liked best. He stroked it so slowly.

Shut up, she sent back, her voice warped with hate, frustrated at the need that burned at her. *Shut up and fuck me.*

He almost came at that. He sucked in breath through grit teeth and his cock twitched inside her mouth. His hands tightened their hold on her hair—his hips jerked. She felt him twitch in her mouth again and continued, fighting her gag reflex. It was almost over.

The fingers inside her had increased their pace as the one at her clit stayed steady. She felt herself clench twice. Her body was growing taut—she tried to relax.

His voice was strained.

“Fuck—”

Using her hair for leverage, Draco guided her head up and down, moaning as she worked at him. Gradually he urged her to go faster, his pains to be gentle fallen to the wayside as he fucked her throat. He let her break for air a few times, but very briefly before he pulled her back down again. She was gagging, squeezing his thighs again to say she was at her limit but release was so near he ignored it. Saliva dripped down. Her eyes watered and leaked. She pounded her fist on his thigh, her eyes shut tightly as she climaxed suddenly, her body shaking.

Let me breathe—!

Just a moment, sweetheart, he hissed in equal parts pleasure and agony.

He felt his balls draw tight. He felt rather than saw her draw in her magic to either attack him or push herself away—Draco lashed out with a magic dampener (a lighter, modified version of the one he'd put on her ring) and sensed her power gutter just as he came with a groan. He dragged her to the base of his cock and kept her there as he spurted inside her. Hermione's eyes rolled back briefly as her orgasm continued—the hands at her lower body had not stopped and drew it out for longer until it bordered on painful and her body jerked,

overwhelmed. She let out an exasperated, pleading sound from around his cock, her face turning dark.

Drained, he let her go, and at once she slid down and retched onto the ground before he could order her to swallow then began to cough and gasp for air. His semen gleamed in the light. She wiped at her face, breathing hard. Her body still shook sporadically from her climax.

Still rolling off his orgasm, Draco rose from the armchair and went to her, rubbed her back soothingly.

“That was cruel of me,” he said out loud.

Not an apology. Just an acknowledgment.

She wiped at her eyes.

“Are you alright?” He asked.

She wouldn’t look at him.

“Do I *look* alright?”

Draco vanished the sick from the floor with a motion of his hand, tidied her up with another. He bent down, grabbed her. She tried to pull away.

“No,” he said harshly, pulling her to her feet and toward the bed. “You aren’t going anywhere. It’s your turn, now.”

“I already came, that’s enough,” she said, but he was pushing her down over the edge of the bed onto her front so that she remained standing, her ass in the air, her hips in his grip. His fingers were at her vulva, playing with the wetness coating her there.

“You ordered me to fuck you, and I intend to obey my wife,” he said, groping her ass.

“Then get it over with,” she said, gritting her teeth.

He smirked. “With pleasure.” And he pushed inside roughly.

He began to move immediately, pounding into her.

“How could I leave my wife unfulfilled?” He asked, leaning down close to pant in her ear.

“You do this for your own selfish gain more than for me,” she snapped, wincing as his hands dug deep into her hips. Her legs threatened to buckle but her walls were clenching him, her need flared back up quickly. The bed shook underneath them from the force of Draco’s thrusts—Hermione already felt raw.

He slowed, then stopped.

“Not entirely selfish,” he said. “I think I’ve proven to be rather generous in certain regards, don’t you think?”

His cock sank back inside her slowly, and Hermione felt every inch as it filled her. She clenched around him again and he hissed. He kissed her shoulder, worrying her skin between

his teeth gently, throbbing inside her. He groaned loudly and gave sharp thrusts. Hermione gripped the sheets tightly, a flush creeping up her throat.

"You do it to show you can," she said, her voice hoarse. "Because you always need to prove you have control."

"If you really think that's true I'll let you tie me down next time," he promised, his head falling back in pleasure.

"I'll hold you to that," she said, gasping when he slapped her ass quite hard.

He chuckled. "Please do."

Hermione bit her lip, and unable to help herself, bucked against him. Draco grinned.

"Come for me," he said, reaching underneath her to palm her breasts in his hands. His fingers teased her nipples as he pounded at her, their bodies pressed together.

"I hate you," she hissed.

"Come, sweetheart."

He pushed in deeper, his hips driving into her with such force her face was pressed into the mattress, her mouth open and gasping.

"Come."

She did, her eyes screwing shut and her body quivering underneath him as he continued to thrust. Their bodies were slick with sweat. She gripped him so sweetly he came within moments, moaning her name. An idea struck him, and he brushed her hair from her back and over one shoulder. She was still in the midst of her orgasm, and barely noticed.

He waited a moment for her to come down, then reached underneath her and began to stroke between her legs. Hermione, panting, stirred and tried to turn over. He pinned her down.

"Please—"

He was still hard inside her. He began to thrust again.

Within minutes she was writhing again, begging for release. He was fucking her slowly, a hand still occupied at her clitoris, his fingers gleaming and slick with her arousal and his cum. She was pushing her hips back into him, meeting him thrust for thrust, her moans filling his ears, fueling his movements.

At her climax, she cried out his name.

Acting quickly, he drove his bite into her shoulder and began to feed.

16. Digging In

They were awoken the next morning by a curt knock at the door.

Hermione's eyes opened—Draco was already rising from the bed, nude, his skin pebbling from the cold air. He gestured with his hand and dressed himself before approaching the door. Hermione was barely sitting up. She was also nude, shivering from the cold and trying to suppress a yawn when he looked back and gestured at her, dressing her, too. Warm and grateful, she wrapped her robe around herself and stood.

"Enter," Draco said. "Good morning, Pansy."

The door opened and Pansy was in the doorway. She bowed.

"Good morning, Pansy."

"Good morning, my Lord. The Eyes have returned."

Draco paused. He clearly had not been expecting this news. Hermione watched curiously.

"Excellent," he said.

"They are in the parlor," Pansy replied. "Will you be wanting to meet with them or should I tell them to come back later?"

"No," Draco said. "We'll do this now. Take them into the drawing room. We will meet with them shortly."

"Of course, my Lord." Pansy bowed and left.

Draco turned to Hermione, a faint smile curving his lips. The sunlight streaming in from the windows illuminated him in full force—he was dazzling as ever. Sometimes, when she couldn't sleep, she liked to imagine his rotting corpse.

"What do you think, my love?" he asked. "Will they have good news for us?"

Choosing not to answer, Hermione turned away and went to the vanity to settle down her hair, which was tangled from sleep. Her hands brushed over the punctures of his bite from the night before—she sucked in a breath, wincing in pain.

He had fed from her ravenously as she'd climaxed. It was like nothing she had ever felt, and it clearly had been pleasurable for him, too. Somehow, the pain had amplified her pleasure and she'd screamed, her back arching as he'd ejaculated instantly. His grip had been tight on her hips and she'd felt every throb of his cock as he'd emptied himself inside her, his mouth latched onto her and sucking greedily. She'd thought she might pass out—she'd fought to get away from underneath him but he had kept her pinned down until their climaxes had died. When he had pulled out she had felt the rush of hot cum leaking from inside her—her heart was pounding and her throat still bleeding, but from the feel of it, the blood was already coagulating and the flow had lessened. Draco had bent between her legs until his mouth met her mound and kissed her there, leaving a bloodied print of his lips when he had pulled away.

Dazed and spent, she had been too weak to protest further—her legs shook when she attempted to push off the bed. Draco had cleaned themselves off, cast the contraceptive and let himself collapse on the bed beside her. They had fallen asleep almost instantly after.

The musty smell of sex was still heavy around her. She felt slightly dizzy. He'd taken a lot of blood—she looked down and saw the stains on the bedding, now dried to a brownish red. Slightly repulsed, she grabbed her wand from the bedside table and pointed it at a window, opening it to air out the room.

Draco had been watching and now approached her. "You'll have your chance to speak with George today."

She'd gone back to running her hands carefully through her curls.

"If they've just got back then it's better to let him rest. I'll speak with him later."

He chuckled.

"You seem to forget so easily you can command anything of them and they will obey," he said gently, his hand on her shoulder, making her pause. "Try it, sweetling. Take what you want. They can't say no to you. And if they dare, you make them regret it."

"And it's that sort of mindset that made me fall for you," she said with a sarcastic smile.

He laughed.

"Leave your hair the way it is. You always look your most beautiful after I've had you."

His hand stroked the punctures on her throat gently. A tingling sensation bloomed under his touch as he healed it.

"Thank you, my Lord."

He pressed a kiss to the edge of her jaw.

"You're welcome, little bird."

A thought struck her.

"What do I taste like?"

He sighed, his warm breath rolling over her hair and skin.

"Like heaven," he said. "So delicious I could drink you dry."

He released her and went into the bathroom before she could reply. Hermione waited until the door closed behind him then turned back to the mirror and resumed tending to her hair, frowning.

Their walk to the drawing room was short and silent. Draco had exited the bathroom, seen her hair and frowned but said nothing. He had held out his arm and she had taken it—he had looked over her attire and changed it with a lazy flick of his hand—these robes were warmer than the previous pair, which she was grateful for. The dress underneath was dark and long

and clung to her body. The material was heavy and thick. Its neckline was hardly daring compared to what he'd made her wear in the past.

They had reached the doors leading into the drawing room. Draco had lifted his hand to shoulder level, his palm open and waiting. Hermione took it and they entered.

Four Death Eaters stood around the room and had been speaking quietly to each other until they caught sight of their hosts. All male. Approximately the same age. They straightened at once—Hermione's eyes instantly landed on George. He gave a tiny nod in greeting and joined the others as they sank to one knee in unison.

"Rise," Draco said. He led Hermione to the mantle where a fire burned merrily away. Two chairs appeared there—elegantly carved from mahogany with gold detailing and a lushly upholstered cushion. He had Hermione sit first, releasing her hand at last when she was done, and then followed suit. He leaned back, legs spread and his arms on the rests, calmly surveying the small team.

"Sit," he said, and they obeyed, settling in the armchairs before them.

Hermione studied them as they did so. There was George, of course—the tallest of the four. They must have come directly from wherever they'd been previously during their mission—they appeared sleep-deprived but otherwise unscathed. As it wasn't a formal meeting, they didn't have their ceremonial robes on and so were dressed in mostly black and plain robes—some in better condition than others. George had a bandaged hand. One of them—the blond one with the brown eyes—had a vertical scar at the edge of his mouth. Another had a prominent nose that reminded her of Snape. None of them looked familiar. The clothes they wore were dark and they looked fit, like each had been an adventurous, rugged youth once. She knew in George's case at least that had been a certainty. Something about the watchfulness of their eyes reminded her of a hawk seeking prey. Even George had it—she had not noticed it before and couldn't remember if he'd had that quality before the war. Her heart beat a little faster.

"You all know my wife," Draco began, his voice toneless but commanding. They nodded. "Hermione, I want to introduce you to my Eyes. We have Edward, Michael, Lucas, and of course you know George."

As he'd said their names each man acknowledged Hermione with a dutiful bow of their heads. She had nodded back at each one of them, wishing she didn't still feel so awkward.

"It is a pleasure," she said, thankful her voice had come out smooth.

The men sat silently, comfortable in the stillness of the room as they waited for their Master to speak again. They might have been statues. The four of them together looked like they could be very patient if they had to be, and she surmised rather grimly that Draco must have picked them very carefully to be his spies.

"What news do you bring me?" Draco asked.

The first man—the one sitting nearest to her with the scar whom Draco had introduced first as Edward—spoke up. His voice was low but deep, and his skin was tanned and his face freckled and rugged, like he spent a great deal of time outdoors.

“We found Longbottom’s grandmother, my Lord,” he said. “We tracked down her location, but we were too late.”

“She’s dead then,” Draco said, his voice flat.

The man bowed his head.

“I’m afraid so, my Lord.” He jerked his head to the side to gesture to the man beside him. “Michael looked at the body. We found she had passed of a heart attack. Couldn’t tell if it’d been hours or a day before we got to her, but it was recent. She wasn’t as bloated yet as some of the others we’ve found.”

Draco exhaled rather sharply through his nose.

“I might have expected that,” he said, frowning. “She was ancient. Still—you found nothing else?”

“No, my Lord,” said Lucas, shaking his head. He had brown eyes and tousled, rather shaggy dark hair that reminded Hermione of Harry. The second that comparison came up her stomach lurched. She forced the thought away.

“We searched the place top to bottom and found nothing. No trace of anyone else living there or visiting. No correspondence. No traces of anyone else’s magic except the ward at her door.”

“What sort of ward?” Draco asked.

“A blood relation charm,” Michael said. The apparent Healer of the group, because as he spoke his hands gestured, and she caught sight of a symbol tattooed on the back of one. She had seen it once long ago—before the kidnapping—she remembered browsing through pamphlets on healing certifications programs she had found at St. Mungo’s.

“We located her Secret Keeper beforehand,” Edward explained. “A non-threat family member. Didn’t know anything about Longbottom himself, only where the Grandmother was. We disposed of her quickly and took enough blood with us to get through.”

Draco nodded. Hermione could sense his displeasure.

Sympathy, faint and stirring, prodded at her heart. When—and how—would Neville find out about his grandmother? Provided that they hadn’t torched the scene. And they had killed another unnamed relative, as well.

She felt along that jagged edge within herself again, waiting to feel the pity she knew she should feel. It was there, but faint.

Do not waste your tears for them, the warped voice told her. It was almost affectionate. She fought not to cringe at it. They abandoned you. Their tears for you have dried. Do not water a dead tree.

Hermione frowned. Abandoned?

They’d never.

Are you so certain? It replied.

What do you know that I don't? she asked.

The voice didn't answer. She blinked and tried to catch on to the conversation happening around her.

"The last I heard of the woman, she was going senile," Draco was saying.

"Yes," the third man said. "There was some parchment on a table in the flat, but none of the writing on it made sense."

"How was the place?" Draco asked. "Tidy? Unkempt? Did she look starved? Did anybody else live with her?"

"It was clean, my Lord," the third man spoke again. "She was alone and was clearly being supplied with food and looked after—she couldn't have been able to do it on her own at that age. Someone must have been coming in and out of there, but we found no definitive trace."

"Interesting," Draco said. He turned to Hermione and smiled. "What do you think, sweetheart?"

This was not what Hermione had expected. She had waited to hear him shout, to hiss his anger out over this loss as Voldemort had done, according to Harry. But Draco was calm. Reasonable.

She felt nervous suddenly but ignored it. Tried to focus on Draco's face.

"There was most likely a system set up to transport food and necessities to appear inside her flat, and probably for the place to keep itself clean," she said slowly, but her voice was level and sure. "I doubt, knowing the risks, that anyone would have been allowed to visit her unless they could guarantee it could not be traced. I don't think Longbottom would have risked a familial visit."

Even as she said it, a faint part of her hoped it wasn't true.

Pain changes people.

The poor woman had died alone and preserved inside a cell of her grandson's making. How long had she been living in such conditions? Had she even been senile enough to know and consent to it? Or had she found herself in a strange space that she couldn't leave with no or very irregular human contact? The thought turned her stomach.

To be locked up against your will... unable to leave... left in the dark...

Neville couldn't have done such a thing. Not to his own family. Not in a manner so similar to his enemy. Not after knowing the trauma it could entail. He couldn't have been ignorant to the repercussions his actions would have. Surely he would have known better than to lock up his own blood in a manner similar to how she had been locked up. He had seen her after, at the Burrow when she had escaped. He had seen the trauma. He couldn't have...

But Draco's warning rang in the back of her head and she doubted herself.

George was changed. He sat before her now in allegiance to her husband. How much worse did it get with Neville?

Why did he even need to?

Was there anything left out of all the good she'd ever known?

"You're very likely right, my love," Draco said, reaching over to take her hand, breaking her train of thought. He seemed proud. "I don't think he'd have risked it, either. What irony that in trying to protect his family, they still ended up dead."

Two of the men smiled.

"There have been some sightings of Longbottom while you have been gone," Draco continued. "He manages to avoid capture each time. Darts about, changing his appearance and mocking my men. He's grown bolder and bolder."

He didn't mention why Neville was suddenly so active, nor did he look at Hermione as he spoke.

Bold enough to try to conspire with my wife, came his voice into Hermione's head, low and angry. She fought not to jump. He wasn't looking at her but she felt his anticipation, the sharp and fraying edges of his hatred. His grip had firmed around her hand. *But the tides turn, sweetheart, and he can't swim forever. I want him to drown.*

"Go and rest," he said suddenly, letting go of Hermione's hand to stand. "I have a plan. I'll send word in a few days if the time is right."

"Yes, my Lord."

They rose and bowed and were moving to leave when Draco's spoke to her again through his thoughts.

Now's your chance.

She hesitated.

Don't be shy, little bird.

"George," she called, hating the tone of her voice.

The men turned back to look at her in mild surprise.

George approached and bowed again. The others left silently.

"Yes, my Lady?" George said. He smelled of smoke and the outdoors.

"Stay," she said. "I would speak with you."

"I am at your service, my Lady," George said, inclining his head.

"I have matters to tend to," Draco said, sounding pleased. "Try to leave him in one piece, my love, won't you?"

He took Hermione in his arms and kissed her forcefully, his hand groping at her ass. She fought not to squirm, knowing he wanted to get a reaction from George.

He pulled away, grinning, but his voice was dark and low in her head as he walked away.

Behave.

Go fuck yourself, she shot back coolly, and his surprised and delighted laughter rang in her head as the door closed behind him.

George watched her carefully as she tried to calm herself.

“To what do I owe the honor of your attention, my Lady?” he asked.

Hermione studied him for a moment.

“What did you do with the bodies?”

“We left the grandmother there but we burned the other. Usually we burn the places we search. Draco gave us orders before we left to leave the place intact. That way if Longbottom came across her, he would see it for himself. We left him a message, too.”

A shiver ran through her.

“He calls you his Eyes,” she said. “You find people for him. Is that all you do? If you’d found her alive, would you have killed her?”

George drew back. “I see what you’re getting to. No, it’s not all I do. Or have done. If she’d been alive, we’d have brought her here to my Lord for questioning.”

“But if it were someone else?”

“We don’t always kill,” George said, sounding as casual as if he were ordering from a menu at his favorite restaurant. “Mostly he uses us for spying on people. Following them. Leaving a threat if needed. If there’s suspicious activity anywhere he’ll send us out to investigate.”

“Who have you killed?” she asked. “How many?”

“I haven’t kept count,” he said softly. “It’s better that way. Many of them were reporters who question his power... and the nature of your relationship. Our old friend Neville’s been very active in making sure his account of this tale won’t die out, but as time passes and bodies pile up, less people are keen to listen. Or believe, if it means a fate similar to the others who dared ask questions.”

She might have guessed. Of course Draco would still be working to cover his tracks. Keeping the illusion active was the point of the trick—if you didn’t bother, it didn’t last.

Still, it was a strange feeling, to know that the actual truth had been largely obliterated. All that awful stuff, silenced. A nebulous web, spun from lies to replace it. Who was she without her history? He had been right to tell her not to cling to it. But she was already losing herself. What came next?

Draco’s voice interjected. *Ask him about the Order.*

She sat down, a hand pressed to her stomach.

“What happened to the Order?” she asked. “After I left, what happened?”

George hesitated. “Do you really want to hear this? It’s been ages.”

“Tell me,” she said sharply.

He bowed his head—she had seen the flash of surprise in his eyes.

“Forgive me, my Lady. Allow me to enlighten you.”

Regret had come almost as swiftly as her anger. Her apology was on her tongue, awaiting its release, but she let it stay there and wilt.

I deserve to know... and you have no right to question me.

“May I sit?” he asked. She nodded stiffly, and he sat on the chair opposite her, sighing.

“We got ratted out by Mundungus,” he said bitterly after a moment. “That damned drunk traded us all for a new hiding hole and a pile of coin shortly after you disappeared and Neville had come back. We never found Mundungus, but after Voldemort found us there was hardly anyone left to try and look for him. That was before the battle—before Harry—”

“Before my husband killed him,” Hermione said, her voice flat.

“Yes,” George said quietly. He cleared his throat. “We couldn’t find you and had no hope of knowing where to look next, but Neville had a clue—he knew he’d been Obliviated and he’d come back with a key that had traces of a Portkey on it, so we worked on restoring his memory as best as we could. We finally did about a year and a half later. We saw you in the prison. We saw Zabini’s Polyjuiced body. My Lord had held Longbottom there for a week or so by the time you came back. In Longbottom’s memory we heard him confess to what he’d done to you and Zabini. Our next move was cracking that key until it led us to Malfoy’s home where he kept you. We were too late.”

She remembered the move to that second manor, how confused she had been during, Draco’s refusal to give answers as usual. Had the Order acted more quickly, how different might things be now?

“You always were,” she agreed bitterly. Her fists had clenched.

“When we realized he’d set a trap for us and had taken you to another secret location, we put it to a vote: we either had to focus on finding you, or work on defeating Voldemort,” George continued, looking vaguely contrite.

Hermione looked up, her eyes incredulous.

“We barely managed to avoid my Lord’s trap he’d set for us,” George said. “We knew it would only get worse. We didn’t have enough resources to do both at the same time, my Lady.” He couldn’t meet her eye. “And we were still foolish enough to think that we would be successful at accomplishing both.”

“You... you stopped looking for me,” Hermione said slowly, rising from her seat. She felt numb. “Did I hear that right?”

“Think of the wonderful life you have now,” George said, his voice pleading. “Had we managed to find you, my Lady, none of this would exist.”

“There were enough people in the Order that the tasks could have been divided,” she hissed. “You *knew* what I had been through with Draco and what I was facing when he forced me to come back. You abandoned me—*Harry* abandoned—” she pressed a hand over her mouth, her heart heavy, but no tears fell.

That insidious voice rose again.

Do not waste your tears on them, delicious one, when they left you to rot. Beautiful flower, you could have had your time and wilted gracefully. Because of them you have been framed and forced to bloom for eternity. Your husband took you from the sun and they withdrew the soil that nurtured you.

Be quiet, she thought wildly.

It made sense. She understood. She did. But she had languished all those years—unable to save herself yet hoping they could. Even when she had given in to Draco little by little, that hope had still burned. It had been the only thought that had kept her going, at times.

And all that time—they had chosen to forget her.

George saw the look on her face—the utter crush in her shoulders. There was no trace of shame on his face now. In fact, he seemed more resolute. She hated him for it.

“Harry and Neville fought for you,” he said. “They didn’t want to let you go—especially Harry. We didn’t give them much of a choice. Then the battle came.”

She stared at him. “So everyone agreed to leave me for dead.”

Even Neville...

He shook his head. “Voldemort had us up against the wall. Harry was so focused on you he almost forgot about stopping him. We remembered what the Dark Lord had done to Neville. We were wasting resources chasing after thin air trying to find you.”

Hermione’s hands were cold. George continued.

“We weren’t trying to be malicious. We felt awful about it. We just thought we needed to focus on the bigger issue so we could get back to finding you more quickly.”

She heard none of it.

“Well you never did,” she snapped. “What happened to the rest of the Order?”

George stood too and stood in front of the lit fire in the hearth, warming his hands.

“Most of the Order died at the battle. I didn’t know you’d made an appearance there until you’d been taken back... By the time I’d heard it was too late and we were all split up—there were so many dead and Fred and I’d been captured and taken away. I think it was a year later that I was reborn with Lord Malfoy. His first task for me was to prove my loyalty. He ordered me to hunt down the rest of the Order and kill them.”

“Who?”

“Colin Creevey,” he said. ‘Tonks. Parvati.’ His face twisted briefly in pain. “Lee Jordan. We’d started taking in more members after you left. All for naught.”

Hermione’s head hurt.

“And then what?”

“When I had proved my loyalty, my Lord made me part of his surveillance team. We watch people. If somebody needs silencing, we’ll guarantee it.”

Draco’s voice interjected. *Has he told you about my gift yet?*

If you don’t mean a basket of fruit, I’m not interested, she sent back.

Ask him, he commanded. *Now.*

Hermione steeled herself.

“What did my husband give you?”

George turned and smiled—an odd, wry one that unsettled her.

“My Lord honored me with the gift of dual sight. He can see through my eyes at any moment, and if he so wishes, he may allow me to see through his.”

That explained that odd change she had seen in his eyes weeks ago, the very one she was seeing now, where his left eye was much paler than its actual regular blue—she recognized half of Draco’s stare as it watched her, bright and sly from George’s face.

Surprise, Draco said in her head, his tone wicked.

Hermione fought not to take a step backward, stunned.

“That’s why he calls you his Eyes.” A sudden laugh bubbled up her throat—she couldn’t help it and let it out. “I didn’t think he meant it so literally.”

“My team and I work as the Eyes of the Lord,” George said. “And we are always watching.”

Thanks to Draco and Harry, Hermione had seen a number of disturbing things in her relatively short lifetime. This now joined their ranks.

She thought back to the other quiet, watchful men.

“All of you have it?”

“No,” George said. “Only I share that honor with my Lord.”

He seemed proud of the fact. She shook her head in disbelief, her scoff trapped in her throat.

“So he can keep you in check if he senses you have doubts,” she said flatly, and then addressed Draco’s eye directly: “I thought you said I was the only one you were satisfied with controlling, darling. This is a new extreme, don’t you think?”

It winked at her.

George shook his head.

“I won’t question my Lord’s motives,” he said. “Nor do I have any doubts. I made my choices, my Lady. I won’t take them back.”

He blinked, and Draco’s eye was gone.

There was a beat of silence.

"I can't," George added quietly—more to himself than to her. "Not at this point."

They stood watching each other in silence for seconds that passed like hours. Distantly, through the window, she heard the shrill cry of a falcon.

"You're angry with me," he said. "I don't blame you."

"There's no point in it, I know," Hermione said slowly. "But I'm sure you can understand how it might feel to regain something familiar after so long, but have it turn out totally changed."

George nodded.

"You aren't the only one who feels it," he said. "Our former selves are dead. There's no use dragging them back to suit our guilt, is there?"

"That's true," she admitted, watching him carefully. "You really have no regrets, then."

"I can't afford to," he said simply. "The best I can do is move forward. I have a better position here and now than I did when I was on the wrong side. I watched Ron die from across the battlefield and I couldn't get to him in time. I watched Charlie and two younger students get crushed by a falling wall from the castle. My little sister was captured, raped, and beaten to death when she tried to escape."

There was no emotion in his voice. Only cold facts.

"I didn't find out about most of those deaths until after I'd joined Lord Malfoy. If I hadn't, I'd have spent the rest of my life wondering. Out of my entire family, I'm the only one left. All I can focus on now is keeping myself safe, and my duties to my Lord. I've got nothing else."

"Then I commend you, soldier," she said spitefully. "For your loyalty."

His mouth curved.

"I thought you said you wouldn't judge me."

"I'm trying not to." She looked away and tried to calm herself. It didn't work. She faced him again.

"If you hadn't stopped your search for me, and if you'd managed to find me, what do you think things would be like now?" she didn't wait for him to answer. "If I'd been there with Harry and Ron, we would've had a *much* higher chance of defeating Voldemort. I bet they didn't even find half. Neither of them were patient or focused enough to find the clues they needed."

She took a deep breath, but her anger had gone past a simmer and would not be soothed. Words that she had harbored internally with shame pushed to get out, and she was helpless to it. George stared at her warily.

"I was the reason they got through so much without dying," she said, beating her hand against her chest once. "All those years—they wouldn't have figured out the Basilisk without me, nor the Devil's Snare. They wouldn't have been able to get rid of Umbridge or save

Sirius and Buckbeak, either. And they still left me behind because they thought they were protecting me that way.”

“Then they were fools for not having realized,” George said.

She paused, and then realized her defenses of them were gone. He was right. Draco had called them such many times over the years, and she had always rushed forth to protest but that urge was gone now. They were right, and she was finished with trying to persuade herself that they had not had a hand—albeit unwitting—in her captivity. Draco had told her that, too, and she had rejected it, thinking he was trying to manipulate her again. Perhaps that was right, but the truth could no longer be denied. How could they have thought it would be a good idea?

They never even thought to talk to me about their concerns. I would have understood. We could have made a plan. But they didn't even try.

“Yes,” she finally agreed. “They were. They should have known they could never manage it without me.”

Hermione laughed bitterly, feeling rather ragged in her anger, like a seam coming messily undone. A distant sense in the back of her mind suggested she stop but she refused. This had been years in the making, hadn't it? She'd clung to her loyalty and hope for so long... and had proved herself the fool for it.

“It's because of them all of this happened. I tried to chase after them when I realized they'd left the castle. I almost reached them, I know I did. But Malfoy got to me first.”

Her eyes had gone distant as the memory resurfaced. The blow to the head she'd suffered when she'd been knocked to the ground by his spy. Waking up in Malfoy's bedroom with no notion of where she really was or what would come ahead. The terrifying chase through the woods and the subsequent rape.

And in the meantime, Harry and Ron were safely away wherever they'd chosen to go, patting themselves on the back that they'd saved her from danger.

Her hands formed into fists. The coil of her anger was stretched taut to the point of breaking.

“They abandoned me twice.”

The voice came forth.

Everyone seems to think they know what's best for you. Their love for you misguided them, and look how that left you, the voice said. You owe them no more loyalty, no more affection. Let the betrayal harden you, not break you.

Who are you? Hermione asked it angrily, her heart pounding. **Why** won't you leave?

Why would I leave, precious one, when I have always been here? The voice replied, sweet and sly. We are one. We always have been. I am the part of you least acknowledged, most formidable. Had you known me sooner, we might have changed the course of your fate. A pity it took these circumstances for us to truly meet.

Hermione's expression had caused George worry. He stepped close with his head bent low, his eyes concerned.

"Is something wrong?"

She shook her head sharply, turning and distancing herself from him as if afraid he would hear the voice, too. She was both afraid of it and yet desperate to hear what it would say next. George watched, at a loss.

I have lingered at the edges of your mind all your life and made appearances but rarely. I have been behind your acts of wrath. My voice was so weak then and you barely used me—how could you know what I was to become? You always regretted what you did after the fact, but you cannot deny how good it felt to unleash me. You had reason and power, and yet you still denied my existence. You denied yourself. But you cannot get rid of me, and so I have strengthened over the course of this marriage. The Horcrux has given me a voice, and thanks to your husband I am a closer part of you than I have ever been. I am yours to wield.

Acts of wrath... what was it referring to?

Images flashed in her mind's eye.

Her blackmail on Rita Skeeter. Umbridge's horrible plight in the Forbidden Forest. The near-murderous rage that had overtaken her the morning after the damned consummation of the marriage. Punching Draco. She continued to search her memories—what else lied in between?

If George's account was to be believed, then the voice was right. She had agreed to let her past go, but she hadn't thought it would come this quickly. But they had let her down. She owed them nothing now.

From now on, you make the decisions, her Horcrux whispered to her. *You hold the power. You thought I was a curse. You were wrong—I am your blessing, and your husband's curse.*

George was staring at her, waiting for her to speak again.

Her anger had ebbed away quickly. An odd buoyancy had filled her in its place—she felt light. Free. It felt so good she smiled.

"Don't look so worried," she said. "I'm alright."

George didn't look convinced.

A knock at the door stole their attention from each other.

"A visitor, my Lady," Pansy announced as she opened the door. "Theodore Nott."

He walked in as Pansy was leaving, saw Hermione and George, and grinned. He walked up to them and bowed to Hermione. She stiffly offered her hand and he took it, kissed its back. He and George nodded at each other.

"What a pleasure to come across you today, my Lady," Nott said. "Lord Malfoy requested my presence earlier, but I find Pansy hasn't got a clue where he is."

"I'm sure he'll be with you shortly," Hermione said. She had made up her mind to leave and go catch up to Pansy when Draco's voice interjected.

When Nott arrives, stay with him. Entertain him until I get there. I'm sure you remember my plan? It won't take you much work—he'd eat rotten scraps off your toes if you let him.

Where are you? She sent back.

I won't be long, sweetheart. Just mind my request.

She wanted to laugh. 'Request!' As if he ever said please.

Hermione wanted to ignore the order. Nott looked too happy, and George seemed distant—but that seemed a common fixture in him now—she wondered specifically what sort of psychological damage the deaths of most of his family and his own betrayal and servitude had incurred within him.

Then she wondered if he had the same thought about her.

Don't dwell there.

She made herself smile—it must have looked as forced as it felt but it still worked—Nott appeared captivated.

"It's good to see you again," she said.

"I had hoped with my offer the last time we spoke, my Lady, that you'd be requesting my presence sooner than my Lord would," Nott said. "Our conversations are so much more interesting, and the view is infinitely better."

George stiffened.

"Mind yourself, Nott," he said. His voice was cold—Hermione had never heard it like that before. "You will not insult our Lord in his own home."

"It's merely a jest, Weasley," Nott said, sounding bored. "I only wanted to pay a compliment."

The door opened again, and Pansy appeared.

"George," she said, "you are being summoned."

George gave Nott a suspicious look and left with Pansy.

"So he's here, then?" Nott asked.

Hermione shrugged delicately. "My husband comes and goes at his own accord. I can hardly keep up."

She turned and walked toward the window, unsure of what to do. Nott seemed benign enough, and she felt safer with her magic restored, but she still didn't know what role he played in Draco's court.

Outside of the Fool, that is.

"Understandable," Nott replied, nodding. "My Lord is a very busy man."

"He leaves me for days at a time," Hermione said, attempting a sorrowful expression. Nott had turned, following her movement. Would he dare come closer? He had been quite brazen the last time they had spoken. She felt slightly apprehensive, unsure of why Draco would

choose to put her in this position. Her hand grazed against the pocket of her gown where her wand was secured.

He wouldn't put you up to this if he didn't think you couldn't do it, she told herself. And you did do well at the feast. You can do it again.

It was always about grabbing a man's attention, wasn't it? Distaste curdled in her stomach. It seemed it was always happening to her whether she cared for it or not. She wondered whatever had happened to Harry's Invisibility Cloak before his death. Had they left it with her, she would have made great use of it and perhaps avoided Draco's plan for her.

She could feel Nott's stare.

And they look at me like I'm something to eat. Like their attention was just what I wanted. Like I exist to be gawked and groped at. It's exhausting.

The soft hissing voice resurfaced, barely above a whisper.

Do you not think it is high time you bit back, darling one? Your teeth have been sharpened. This feast has been laid out for you. Dig in.

She repressed a shudder, goosebumps rolling out over her skin, and turned back to Nott.

"He gets to go out and have his fun and his work and I stay here and wait. It's all I do, I think."

Nott cleared his throat. "I'm sure he hates to leave you, my Lady. From how he dotes on you, I'm sure he would stay with you always if he could."

I think he's already managed that, she thought resentfully.

"He can be smothering at times," she admitted, a twist to her mouth. "But I'll admit here and there I do find it endearing."

I want to slap myself for saying that even if I know it's a lie.

"All for your own protection, perhaps," Nott said, advancing slightly, moving around the armchair that stood between them. "But I will again offer my companionship should you ever find yourself alone and unhappy. I'm confident I can assist you in whatever you may need."

She raised an eyebrow.

"You are very generous. I'm sure you have business of your own to tend to rather than stare at walls with me."

"I've sworn an oath to Lord Draco and yourself, my Lady," he said, inclining his head, "that I would serve in any way I might prove useful. Let my devotion be free of doubt."

"We have taken notice," Hermione said, and his head snapped up. "Draco seems fond of you."

That was somewhat true, wasn't it? Draco at least liked to make fun of Nott.

He looked pleased.

"And you, my Lady?" he asked, his dark eyes probing.

She stared at him boldly, letting her lips curve into a faint smile. "I'm still making up my mind."

"If there is any way I might persuade you that I am a friend and not an enemy, I will do it gladly."

"You saw me punish that man at the feast," she said. "I had him break his own wand. You're saying if I ordered you to do the same, you wouldn't hesitate?"

"I wouldn't," he said at once, and he sounded so sure she found she was almost impressed. He was taking his wand out from his robe.

"Say the word, my Lady, and I will do it."

So eager. She almost couldn't believe it.

"There's no need, Nott. Not yet. You may put that away."

He obeyed. A short silence ensued. Hermione felt no need to say anything but watched him carefully. He seemed both pleased and perturbed by it.

"You can call me Theo, if it pleases you, My Lady," he said. "I don't mind being called Nott by anyone else, but when it's from you it feels like a scolding."

"Is that so?" she asked. "Tell me something, then, Theo: did my husband really summon you, or did you come here hoping to see me?"

"I was summoned," he admitted, grinning, "but I wasn't lying when I said I prefer your company over his."

"Sit, then," she said. "If Draco is nowhere to be found, then we'll pass the time."

He sat down gladly, and she did too in a separate armchair, crossing one knee over the other in a manner that had him eyeing her legs.

"Why did Draco summon you?" she asked.

He cleared his throat. "I work on the editorial board of the Daily Prophet. My Lord has the final say over what is published and what is kept back—there was a curious matter to discuss and I thought it would be faster to come discuss it than depend on letters."

"What was this 'curious matter'?" she asked.

Nott shook his head. "I don't think you'd want to hear it, my Lady. It isn't for delicate ears."

Her anger flared.

"It is not your place to decide that for me," she snapped. "You have no idea the things I've endured. Tell me."

"Forgive me, my Lady," Nott said quickly. "The matter concerns an attempted break into my Lord Malfoy's Gringotts vault."

"Who would be so stupid to try that?" Hermione asked, frowning.

“That’s what I’ve been asking myself,” Nott said, rising from his seat to pace around the room. “There were no eyewitnesses, funnily enough. No capture, either. Just an alarm and some furious goblins. The vault wasn’t breached, of course, but the brash boldness of the attempt made me think perhaps it was Longbottom.”

“It might have been a distraction,” Hermione said, thinking fast. “If nobody was apprehended and the vault wasn’t touched, perhaps they might have been drawing everyone’s eyes away from something else. I would recommend getting back in touch with Gringotts and seeing if anything was stolen, or any other attempts made at breaking into another vault.”

Nott paused. The idea clearly had not struck him, and he looked at her as if she’d told him she was leaving Draco for him.

“You are very wise, my Lady. You would make a fine Auror.”

Hermione gave him a thin smile.

“I don’t think my husband would approve.”

Nott shrugged. “Tell him to go to hell.”

That made her laugh. Nott grinned.

“You are growing on me,” she admitted. “Perhaps I could use some company from time to time. It gets so dull here.”

His eyes were guarded but hopeful. “Summon me whenever you wish, my Lady. If I could make you laugh just one more time, I’d be made up for the rest of my life.”

“That’s very ambitious of you,” Hermione said seriously. “I laugh much less than I used to.”

“Yes, I remember,” Nott said. “I used to hear your laugh quite often at school when you were with Potter and Weasley. I used to think it was annoying.”

“You mean you found *me* annoying.”

Nott went red.

“I thought the same of you so it doesn’t matter,” she said. He looked relieved.

“Lord Malfoy is a lucky man to have woken up about you first,” he said. “I suppose sharing a living space will do that. Lucky man indeed.”

“And I suppose if you had been the first, you assume I would have chosen you?”

“If you had, then I wouldn’t be grumbling about some other wizard. A witch like you on a man’s arm would have him dying happy.”

Hermione eyed him carefully, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. So much flattery. She didn’t trust him. But he lapped up her words like honey. Amusing and irritating.

The only one I chose was Harry.

And then he left you behind, the voice said.

She turned to Nott.

"If you have any hope that you'll manage to seduce me, kill it now. I will not be unfaithful to my husband."

His face shifted and paled.

"I had no intention of attempting—"

A gentle laugh rose from her throat. Hermione rose from her seat and advanced toward him. He stayed frozen in place. She reached out and took the side of his face in her palm, stepping closer. His skin was cool but his pupils were dilated and his breathing too controlled.

"Don't lie to me, Nott," she said softly. They were the same height so she stared directly into his eyes and tried not to blink. "Your mistake was assuming I'm naive enough to think your offer of friendship wouldn't involve you testing boundaries until you thought I might be swayed."

Sweat beaded along his hairline.

"My Lady—"

"Did you think I'm such an easy mark?" she asked innocently. "Maybe I was a long time ago, but my husband fixed that. You'll find I have no interest in stupid games or the schemes of desperate men."

There was a soft rustle behind them—Hermione recognized it as Draco Apparating in.

"What have we here?" he asked too casually.

Hermione felt Nott's Adams apple bob as he swallowed. She withdrew her hand from his face.

"I was giving Nott a gentle reminder," she said, smiling at him, pleased by the fear in his eyes. Nott looked confused—and aroused. His eyes darted back up to meet Draco's, who now stood beside Hermione, stone-faced.

"Of what?"

"His place."

A slow grin spread over Draco's face.

"Theo," he said, sounding amused, "are you really stupid enough to go after my wife?"

"Forgive me my Lord," Nott said hurriedly. "I meant no insult."

"Clearly you did if you tried going after what's mine," Draco said, an edge to his voice. "You love the taken women, don't you? You've got a history of chasing after them. Perhaps I haven't made it clear enough that she is mine. How can I prove the point further?"

He looked at Hermione. "How shall he be punished, sweetheart?"

Hermione tilted her head to one side.

"I think you made it clear enough, Draco. Leave him. He amuses me."

Draco narrowed his eyes briefly but complied.

Nott bowed to Hermione.

"Thank you, my Lady," he said. "I will not do it again."

But you'll still think it, she thought.

"I look forward to your next visit."

Draco's arm snaked around her waist.

"You had news for me, Nott?"

"Yes, my Lord," Nott said, straightening, looking so relieved Hermione almost felt sympathy for him.

"I'll hear it in my office, then. Pansy will escort you there."

Nott left the room quickly and met Pansy outside the door.

Draco lingered, wrapping his other arm around Hermione and kissed her hungrily. He pulled away after a moment, a stormy look on his face.

"Idiot thinks he can lust after my wife in my own house," he muttered, more to himself than to her.

"You enjoy it," Hermione said, her stare challenging him. "Don't lie. Why else put me in these clothes and order me to flirt and entertain him if you don't want him panting after me?"

He ran his tongue over his teeth slowly. The salacious look in his eye was scorching.

"I do enjoy it," he admitted. "Flaunting what he can't have in that great mooney face of his. Sweetheart, you could put him on a leash and he'd thank you. The others, too. But you're *mine*."

"That gets you off, doesn't it?"

She already knew. Her hand was on his chest, sliding down slowly, and eventually reached the stiff bulge in his trousers. She cupped it and gave him a slow stroke through the fabric. Draco's eyes closed. She gave another stroke and his head fell back slightly. He gripped her harder and started to push her against the wall.

"No."

She twisted out of his grip quickly. Draco righted himself and stared at her, annoyed.

"He can wait," he said.

"You've made him wait long enough," Hermione said, edging toward the door. "Go talk to him."

He scowled. "What does it matter how long he waits?"

"It doesn't. I'm tired of being around men all day. Now go talk to him and behave yourself."

She walked out of the room before he could snatch her back without seeing his reaction but dearly wanting to, because she was picturing his stunned face with glee.

Alone in the room, his face was exactly as she pictured it.

Author's Note: I know I promised a new chapter a lot sooner than this but it turned out so big I decided to split it into two parts to keep my sanity during editing.

I've got some new art for this fic on my ko-fi page and my Wordpress blog! Check it out at your leisure. The links are in my profile.

Enjoy, leave a comment, thanks for your patience and happy new year!

17. Turned tables

After Nott and Draco had finished their meeting, Draco went to pose for Martin, who'd arrived at the Manor and was currently setting up in the library. Hermione knew Draco most likely wanted her in the library then, but she had reached the end of her rope and felt so restless she practically vibrated. She all but flung herself outside.

The sun was out but covered, and the day was cool—a heavy mist hung in the atmosphere and thick clouds spanned across the sky. She could see faint wisps of her breath appear before her as she began to walk hard, glad she'd had enough sense to remember to fetch a cloak before heading out.

Draco's voice was silk in her head.

And where are you going, wife?

Out, was her terse reply. *Don't come after me. I just need to walk.*

If you wish. But keep in mind the Healer said you shouldn't tax yourself too much. Your spell wasn't that long ago, after all.

It's just walking, Draco. I'll be fine. Besides, if I want to get to where I was before, I need to push myself.

I admire your strength, he replied. *If anything happens, reach for me and I'll come, my love.*

Understood.

There was no response and she walked on, her heart racing. Despite the cool weather she felt overheated and irritable inside her cloak—she simultaneously wanted to shrug it off and draw it tighter around herself.

There was the sound of Apparition and suddenly there was another pair of footsteps crunching along the ground beside her own.

"Are you alright?" Pansy asked, falling into stride beside her quickly.

"I don't know," Hermione admitted, closing her eyes to relish in the scant heat of the sun, half-hidden behind a stretch of clouds. A headache had begun to form—her face felt like it was burning. "I think so."

"Where are we going?" Pansy asked. "Draco didn't tell me. He just ordered me to accompany you."

"To the village. Anywhere. I don't care," Hermione said, pushing some strands of hair from her face. "I needed to be out of the house for a while. I need a long walk so I'd rather not Apparate, if you don't mind."

"Of course. I could walk a distance behind you, if you prefer to be alone."

Hermione's expression softened, and she turned to Pansy.

"No," she said, trying to smile. "Stay with me."

The walk would be long—when they came to the edge of Draco's protective wards Hermione felt her features shifting. She looked down at herself and found she was much taller, with tanned skin and long blonde hair. Pansy was inspecting herself as well and now had olive skin and charming freckles that spanned her face, her hair several shades lighter that glowed in the sunlight. There was the slightest resistance in the magic as they passed through it—to Hermione it always felt like Draco's arms pulling her back when she rolled away from him in bed. She pushed forward and the magic slipped away, allowing her out of its grasp almost reluctantly, as it did every time she ventured past the border.

In their first home, the grounds had been larger and the border had been a longer distance away. In the immediate months after her capture, Draco had kept her locked in the manor, and when he'd finally let her out, she'd tried finding the limits of his land and its wards. He had warned her of the spells surrounding and that she could not pass them, but she had wanted to see it for herself. It had taken her several failed attempts until she had finally managed it. Until her success, almost as if he knew and resented her determination, he would find her and haul her back inside the manor to distract her some way or another. When she'd finally reached it, she had thrown herself against that invisible barrier until it felt her body might break into pieces and she was bruised all over. She had scratched at it until her nails broke off and bled, and she had screamed and howled for help for so long she had lost her voice.

There hadn't been anybody past the wards. The only thing she'd seen was a vast green landscape, stretching on for miles beyond what it took her to reach those limits, and there hadn't been a sign of human life within that vastness.

Draco had not come for her then. When the sky had gone dark and the temperature dropped she had hobbled back to the manor, pained but not defeated, and she had made sure to convey that in her expression when she reached the door and found Draco there waiting, his gaze like a vacuum that sucked her back into his hold.

Hermione blinked the memory away, steeling herself. Beside her, Pansy had not noticed and so said nothing.

They were silent for a while. Hermione's thick robe and woolen scarf kept her warm easily at first but with the exertion of her quick pace she was now beginning to overheat. She felt sweat dewing her skin underneath her layers, and her breath poured out in silky vapors in front of her as she breathed. The sky ahead was clouded but brilliant beneath that loosely woven blanket of clouds—the sun itself peered at them now and then, illuminating the landscape vividly.

She pulled more air into her lungs.

If I could walk until the end of time and never have to spend another moment in his presence, I'd do it.

Hermione's eyes drank it all in. Her hand was in the pocket of her robe, holding her concealed wand for comfort though there was no apparent threat. A light sheen of sweat shone on her skin. Her headache had gotten worse. She felt like the inside of a worn cauldron

—beaten and marked, infused with the magic and ingredients of past brews, awaiting its next lot silently.

An empty, voiceless vessel.

Not anymore.

She'd always had a voice, and had used it without hesitation, yet for the better part of a decade she had been treated just like that poor, silent cauldron. She had been beaten and worn thin, but she still remained. Draco was right in that, at least—she was strong to have lasted thus far. Even without his meddling with the Horcrux, she would have lasted. Much as sometimes she didn't want to.

"Where was Draco this morning?"

"I don't know," Pansy said. "I believe he mentioned having to pay somebody a visit, but he didn't tell me who."

"Hm."

"I take it you had an... informative talk with George today," Pansy ventured carefully.

Hermione turned to look at her. "Did you know what he's done?"

Pansy nodded. "My Lord gave me the barest information about him since he arrived. Everything I know, I learned from the others. I'm often too busy to speak to anyone else."

"He told me what he did," Hermione said, her voice rasping. "Who he's killed."

"Yes," Pansy said. "They celebrated each successful mission of his."

"It's not just that." A stab of pain ran through Hermione. "They stopped looking for me years ago."

Pansy almost skipped a step, surprised. She caught herself quickly, but her face was full of sorrow.

"I'm sorry. That mustn't have been easy to hear."

"It doesn't matter now," Hermione said, breathing hard as they forged on. They'd entered a forest and took pains to not trip over any root or fallen branch.

"It makes sense," she continued. "They were having so much trouble finding any clue that would help them find me. I understand why they did it—I might have expected it, even—but I'm still angry. I can't help it."

Pansy chose not to say anything, knowing her friend wanted to vent.

"I feel like such a *fool*," Hermione said, hissing that last word as she reached out and struck at a branch that posed an obstacle to her crossing. It broke with a loud snap and flew off to the side. "Like an *idiot*. I spent so long waiting on them, hoping they could save me when nothing I tried worked. All that time and they'd either abandoned me or got themselves killed."

"It probably wasn't an easy decision for them," Pansy offered.

“No, I can’t imagine it was,” Hermione conceded bitterly, ducking under more branches as she advanced. “I understand why they did it. I do. But I needed them. I had helped them. And they couldn’t help me. For years, Draco’s been telling me it’s their fault he was able to kidnap me. I always defended them. But he was right.”

Granted, she bore as much blame as they did. Had she not let her emotions overwhelm her at finding Harry’s note on her bed and blatantly disregarding his warning to not go after them, she might have saved herself this life.

If at least for another year.

“If I hadn’t been so blind and stupid, I’d have realized it sooner that they’d never come.”

Draco was always one step ahead, always. No matter how much faith she had in Harry, Neville, and the others, she had to face the facts that they had only ever been able to close in on them when Draco nudged them along. *If* he felt like it. And by then, he’d have sprinted leagues ahead anyway, so it hardly mattered.

She’d been alone all that time. Even with Draco binding her to him, she had been alone.

She had been the one to save herself each time she’d managed to escape, and it was by her own fault that each time he’d managed to rip her right back into his realm. It had been through her own power, although unconscious, that she’d managed to unlock the doors of the balcony. It had been Blaise who had taken her to the Battle of Hogwarts, and he had helped her destroy the diadem. From there she’d found her way to the Burrow. *She* had slipped free of Draco’s restraints on the day of the final battle and had fled the Manor and entered the battlefield in time to watch as Draco murdered Harry.

She still wasn’t quite sure how that had happened, either. She had gone over it many times in her head, since, and could only attribute it to another unconscious loosing of magic.

He’d woken her that day and told her where he was heading, what he was going to do, and who else would be there. She had immediately begged to go, asked him not to do it, to spare them all. He had only grinned, and said once he got back home, they would celebrate. She had tried to seduce him and pull him back into bed, praying it would work so that he would stay and forget about the carnage he would inevitably inflict. For the first time in their marriage he rejected her and left, stationing a guard outside their room so that she might not try to leave.

She’d rushed after him anyway, still begging, threatening and swearing but he’d gone anyway, and she’d been trapped in their bedroom, shivering and internally praying that Harry would be the victor. He’d been gone for hours, and she had paced frantically within their bedroom, attempting again to break the stained-glass window, not even bothering to call to the guard or beg for help, knowing he’d ignore her. All she’d been able to think of was her friends and wonder if any of them would survive. She had tried to assure herself that Harry had faced Voldemort multiple times and lived, but the haunting certainty that his luck had long since run out would not leave her mind. That, and the very real knowledge that Draco and Voldemort were very different.

She had been shaking, holding her elbows, trying to stand still to ward off the tremors. She could still remember the intense anxiety and desperation that had gripped her until she’d

thought her head might burst. At some point—she didn't know when—her anxiety and fear had smoothed over like glass, and all she'd felt was determination.

She had gone to the door, ready to pound and smash at it with her fists, but it had opened before she'd even raised a hand. The guard was on the ground, dead asleep. And so had been the one at the main door of the manor.

There had been no time to wonder at how it had happened. She had found a Portkey tucked inside the pocket of the guard at the main door, took it, and found herself a short distance behind Draco, frozen in horror as she saw the final seconds of his duel against Harry, when Harry had been too exhausted and preoccupied with blocking a barrage of curses to avoid the jet of green light that had come from the side and struck him in the head.

Many had screamed, and she had been among them. Nobody noticed her in the ensuing calamity. People had begun to retreat, to Apparate away, but Draco's followers had already begun to kill the rest or to capture others indiscriminately. By then a few of them had recognized her and shouted at her to go home, to stop at once. And two had chased after her, their faces pale with fear, knowing a reckoning would be due the moment Draco saw her there on the battlefield. By then, she'd seen Draco advance on Neville, and had hurtled toward them.

Draco had pretended at being furious that she'd escaped. He had threatened punishment. But she knew beyond a doubt that he'd been secretly pleased. Either at her finding him victorious on the battlefield or at the fact that she hadn't ran away to any other place where it might take him longer to find her.

If he'd really been furious, he would have ignored her pleas and killed Neville, as well. But he'd let him go, and it had only been Neville from that point on who had bothered trying to help her, still.

(Draco had killed the guards stationed at the manor afterwards, when they had come home. It hadn't been their fault, and they surely would have held her back had her magic not spelled them asleep. They were followers of Draco's and had likely committed evil acts, but she'd still cried at seeing their bodies when Draco had finished with them. She'd told him it had been her fault, but he hadn't believed her then. Luckily, Pansy wouldn't enter Draco's employment until a few years after, so she had been spared from that fate.)

It was still too late, however.

When Neville and Luna had found her, the timing had been ill—how could she leave without Lucio? Even if Draco hadn't found out about their scheme and restored her magic, he still would have made the Horcrux. He might say he would never harm Lucio but she wouldn't dare leave that to be tested... even if Neville came again and she had Lucio with her, it was too late.

And by a matter of a few weeks, too. That was the part that hurt the most.

She might have been freed had luck been on her side, but it had abandoned her too, long ago.

The worst of the damage had been done.

Hermione Granger is gone.

Well and truly.

All that remained was her new identity—the one Draco had forced onto her and she had refused year upon year.

Hermione Malfoy. I still hate the sound of it.

“I never should have trusted them. I should have learned my lesson the first time they left me behind.” She laughed wryly. “I was so blind. They’re all dead now—or nearly all of them, anyway. I hope they know what I am from wherever they are, and I hope they know this lies on their hands as much it does on Draco’s.”

Pansy frowned but dared say nothing.

“I know it’s cruel,” Hermione said. “I don’t care. Let them suffer a fraction of what I’ve been through.”

“They must have suffered, Hermione,” Pansy said, unsettled. “Surely they must have, with the war...”

“A handful of battles,” Hermione said dismissively. ‘It took took a couple years until it was over. *They* got to die. *They* got to choose how they’d dedicate their lives even if it meant dying for a doomed cause.’ She scoffed. “And what good did it do? Harry killed Voldemort. Then what? Draco took his place almost immediately after because they couldn’t manage him in time. He’ll make sure we never die—or that we don’t for a very long time. The only choice I had was to join him and get my power back or continue to be weak.”

A drop of sweat rolled down her temple.

“And I did it. I have my power back. But I’ll still rot.”

Pansy hesitated.

“Maybe we should go back,” she suggested. “You look unwell, my Lady. Tell me how I can help you.”

Hermione shook her head.

“I’m fine.”

Breathing hard, Hermione stopped and put her hand against the trunk of the nearest tree to steady herself. Pain throbbed at her temples. She felt Pansy rush over and hold her by the waist as if she thought she were about to fall.

The voice was stern.

*Do **not** cry.*

She had no such intention. It was rage that burned at her eyes, not sadness. It threatened to warp her vision. And she had been repressing this furious wave all day as she’d been forced to interact with three fools.

There’s some solace in that, knowing I’m not the only one.

She couldn’t even laugh at that. She felt restless and over sensitized, like she would burst if she didn’t make it stop. She felt her magic burning up inside her again and it was just like

when Draco had taken off her ring... was she going under again? None of them had considered that it might happen again. Terror clogged her throat.

She heard branches creaking around her and looked up to see they were all curling in on themselves in the way that a spider's legs do when it dies. Splinters fell onto the ground as they continued to crack and break. The trunk of the tree directly behind her began to blister, as if she were emanating a substantial amount of heat.

Frowning, she stared down at her hands.

How am I doing that?

She remembered the library trembling around her, Draco intentionally stoking her temper.

How could she make it stop? She had been trying her magic out in smallish doses. Even as a child, she'd had more control than she had now. Why was it behaving this way?

Help me, she said to the voice. *What do I do?*

It was silent.

Pansy was speaking, worried, but Hermione couldn't pay attention. The other witch's words might as well have been wind blowing in her ear. The burning was getting worse with every second. Sweat ran down her temples and down the back of her neck, soaking strands of hair and plastering them and her clothes to her skin. She looked down at her hands again. At any second, she expected to see her skin begin to blister from inside out.

Draco's words from the day before floated back to her.

"Unleash it."

But what would that lead to?

He was right. She had been afraid before.

She clenched her jaw.

Not this time.

Just as the burning inside her began to reach its peak and she thought she might implode, she raised her wand by instinct and slashed at the air viciously, putting all her body into the movement. All at once, following the trajectory of her furious magic, there was a viciously thick cutting sound and the entire tops of trees further along their path were sliced off cleanly and crashed to the ground in tandem, creating an odd rush of sound that popped their ears.

They felt the weight of the collective impact in the slight tremble of the ground beneath them. Dying leaves rushed to the ground, floating in spirals as if they were dazed by what had just occurred. The now barren and topless trees stood before her silently, razed and silent.

Pansy stared at it, speechless. She had let go of Hermione who had a wrathful and unfocused look about her eyes. Hermione was breathing hard still, her lip snarling slightly.

"My Lady?"

Hermione didn't respond. She stared at what she had done without expression.

Pansy reached out and took her arm cautiously. Hermione was hot to the touch.

“Are you—?”

Hermione shook her hand off gently.

“I’m fine.” She sounded distant.

It was true. The headache was ebbing fast, and she was feeling better with every passing second. Now all she felt was exhausted, and she remembered dimly that it probably wasn’t wise to have done that when she was still not completely recovered from her mysterious coma. But she didn’t regret it. She looked at what she had done and felt power simmering inside her still, a vast untapped source waiting to be loosed.

She felt a weird thrill run through her. After so much time without her magic, she wanted to test it again and see what else she could do.

She let go of the tree she had been using to support herself and staggered slightly. Pansy rushed to help her. Neither of them noticed the way her hand had burnt into the trunk of the tree, leaving a smoldering imprint of her palm that was embedded an inch deep into the wood.

“I can Apparate us back if you don’t want to walk anymore,” Pansy said.

“No,” Hermione said. “I’m not weak. I can keep going.”

Without another word or glance, she picked up her skirts and continued onward.

Several hours later, as she and Pansy finally returned and passed through the wards, there was that same feeling of pushing through a slightly resistant barrier, but the moment it recognized their signature, it slackened up so they could continue without issue. As they did, Hermione felt the curious sensation of her features shifting back to her true form.

The Manor was beautifully lit against the dusky sky, its windows a warm and beckoning orange glow. As

That’s where the comfort ends, Hermione thought as she and Pansy entered through the kitchen side door.

I’m back, she sent to Draco.

Glad to hear it, he replied instantly. *Did it help?*

Yes.

He was silent, awaiting more information, but she said no more and proceeded to wash up before meeting them all. Pansy had accompanied her to the bedroom and given her a meaningful look, silently asking whether she needed anything. Hermione had shaken her head.

She wanted a shower but didn’t want to make the others wait, so she cleaned herself off with magic and stood in front of the vanity mirror, watching herself carefully.

She looked no different, but at the same time she found it difficult to recognize herself. Standing there with the tap running, she turned her head this way and that, inspecting herself from every angle as if expecting to find a mark she had never had before that was evidence of her transformation, but there was nothing.

When she entered the dining room, Lucio and Draco greeted Hermione warmly. Draco kissed her and led her to the table.

How do you feel? He asked.

Better. She had initially resolved not to tell him what had happened but realizing that even if she asked Pansy not to tell him, he would still find out.

He was watching her, a knowing look in his eye.

Something happened, didn't it?

She tore her gaze away from his and began to eat.

I'll show you later if you behave.

She was taking a drink of water and missed the look of delight and curiosity that flickered in his eyes.

I look forward to it, he said.

The meal went by quickly. Lucio had been fairly quiet. He had sensed something was off about both his parents but couldn't place it yet. He watched them both carefully throughout the dinner, and though they didn't really acknowledge each other for much of that time, he still sensed that there was an unspoken conversation between them, and it confused him all the more.

Mummy didn't look angry, but he felt she was different somehow. It didn't scare him, but he felt apprehensive and worried, so he kept mostly quiet, wondering what might have happened between his parents that he didn't know of yet. Father seemed totally at ease, eating and talking now and then as if nothing were amiss. He asked about his lessons and what he had learned—Lucio answered it all dutifully, fighting the urge to fidget. He wanted to ask what was wrong, if he had been bad without knowing, if daddy had hurt mummy again—but he remembered his father's warning words and the look in his eyes as he'd said them, and his words would shrivel on his tongue.

He wished suddenly that he could leave the house and go stay at a friend's house, but he had no friends. He had made friends in the village the last time they had visited, but they were there so rarely that it was impossible to cultivate a friendship. He would read about that sort of thing in his books sometimes, and it left him with an envy and a longing so deep that he sometimes wished he had been born into a different family. A *normal* one, whatever normal meant.

He couldn't wait until the day he could start going to school for real and not be alone anymore.

If he had a brother... or a sister, he wouldn't feel so alone. The idea struck him suddenly and he felt excitement light up within him at the prospect.

He would have someone to play with and talk to. He would read to them from his books like mummy did for him, and they would go exploring together and learn magic together and go to school together.

The thought had never crossed his mind before. He had thought he was happy being the only child. But as the possibilities resulting from a sibling presented themselves to him in his imagination, he realized he had never wanted anything as much.

Mummy had promised to read him a story before he went to bed so when it was time for Pansy to escort him to his room he hurried over to his mother's chair and tugged on her sleeve, reminded her of her promise. Father had allowed her to go, so she went with him and Pansy into the nursery. Once there, Pansy had been summoned back to the dining room, so it left just him and mummy.

"What story would you like tonight?" she was saying, studying his bookshelf along the wall.

He had quite the collection at that point—she made it a habit of getting him a new book every time she went down to the village. They had gone through most of them by now. Her fingers trailed over the spines of their favorites, tracing delicately over the gentle wear of their bindings. Outside, it had grown windy. The energetic chatter of the swaying trees was like the rustling skirts of the ocean.

"I don't want a *made-up* story," Lucio said from his bed, where he sat. He had withdrawn his arms into the body of his shirt so its sleeves hung limp. He twisted at the waist rapidly to make them move and laughed, amused.

Hermione watched, smiling, and sat down beside him.

"Then what would you like to hear?"

"I want to hear about Hogwarts!" he said excitedly. "And the dragons!"

"Alright, then."

She sat back against his headboard and opened her arms. He wriggled around until his arms were back inside his sleeves and hurried into her embrace. She played gently with his curls.

"Hogwarts was a very big and old castle," she began. "It was founded hundreds of years ago by four people, and their names were Godric Gryffindor, Helga Hufflepuff, Rowena Ravenclaw, and Salazar Slytherin. They had decided that magic was innate, yes, but it must also be taught, so they would form a school to teach magic so magical people could understand it better. They would put the students in four separate houses, and each one was named after one of the founders: Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin."

Lucio looked up at her.

"Father said he was in Slytherin and you were in Gryffindor."

"Yes, that's right."

"Oh." He thought for a moment. "What about George and Pansy?"

“George was in Gryffindor with me,” Hermione said. “And Pansy was also a Slytherin.”

His small hands had taken one of hers. He measured his against hers. She watched, smiling gently at the sight of his chubby little hand against her grown-up one. He was already tall for his age. He would grow and grow in the coming years. Would he be as tall as his father? He already looked so much like him. Draco loved that.

If we had a girl, who would she take after more?

“Father says I would have been Slytherin, too,” Lucio said.

“No,” Hermione replied. “He only says that because his family has always been in Slytherin, but you have my blood in you. You might belong to any house, but what house you end up in doesn’t matter because it doesn’t define who you really are.”

Lucio brought her hand down to the mattress and now played with her fingers, bending them carefully.

“Mummy, when can I go to a real school?”

She hesitated. “I suppose you will when you turn eleven.”

He made a face.

“But I want to go now!”

“That’s the common age for most children to go to boarding school. You’ll have to be patient, my love. You still have some growing to do.”

She ruffled his hair. Lucio leaned out of the touch.

“I want friends,” Lucio said resolutely. “It’s boring here. If father let me down to the village more, I would make so many friends.”

“I know you would,” she said, tweaking his nose gently. “But your father is very protective. I think he’s waiting until your magic comes for you to be a little more independent.”

“But why?”

“Why what?”

“Why does he have to be protective?”

Because he’s stubborn as an untrained dog. Because he hates it when people mess with what’s his. Because you’re his heir, and he has enemies that might dare move against him.

“Your father is a powerful man.” The words were bitter on her tongue. “He just wants to make sure we don’t get hurt.”

She squeezed him gently.

Lucio looked at her, trying unsuccessfully to hide his excitement. He had decided he couldn’t hold back any longer.

“What if I had a brother or a sister to play with?”

Mother looked surprised.

“Oh—” she cleared her throat. She had gone pale, but Lucio didn’t think as to why. “Erm—that is a possibility, yes.”

“I *promise* I would help take care of it,” he said, clasping his hands together in a pleading gesture. “I would read to it and play with it and be a good older brother. *Please*, mother?”

She looked so sad suddenly that it gave Lucio pause.

“Are you really so lonely?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Sweetheart, I don’t know,” she said, rubbing at her forehead. “I don’t think it’s the right time, is all.”

“Why not?” he asked.

“I don’t want to talk about this now,” she said, and her voice was firm. “But I’ll think about it, okay?”

He nodded, slightly deflated.

She hugged him tightly. “Promise me you won’t mention what we just talked about to your father.”

Lucio wanted to ask why, but merely nodded instead.

“I’ll talk to your father about letting you socialize more with the local children, okay? We’ll figure something out so you don’t feel so lonely.”

“And can I go to school in the village?” he asked.

She sighed and shook her head.

“I’m sorry, my love,” she said. “Your father won’t allow it. In a few years you will go to school when you are ready and become your own person outside of your father’s influence. You are bright and kind, and I want you to learn wonderful things and achieve others, and I want you to see what life has to offer beyond this manor. There’s so much to learn, my love. But it all takes time.”

He nodded, disappointed but still hopeful.

She stroked his hair. “Did you still want a story?”

Lucio thought for a moment.

“What did Hogwarts look like?” he asked. “Was it very big? As big as our house? Did it have dragons?”

Hermione thought for a moment, then smiled.

“I can show you. Let’s go to the library.”

Draco was waiting in the bedroom, seated in his favorite armchair and facing the fire when Hermione finally entered. It had grown darker outside and the moon hung high in the sky—the stained-glass window beside the bed glowed eerily with its light.

The room was warm and slightly stuffy from the fire. She felt the temperature change as she'd gone from the nursery to here—the corridors were always cold.

She suppressed a shiver as her body adjusted to the warmth, gooseflesh rolling down the length of her body.

His eyes were on her, waiting.

"How is he?" he asked.

"Our son needs to broaden his social circle," she said, trying to carefully choose her words. "He needs friends. People his own age to talk to and play with. He'll stagnate if he doesn't get that. You've hoarded him in here long enough Draco."

Draco hesitated, then sighed.

"Arrange some playdates for him, then. Pansy will help you."

She hadn't expected that answer. When discussing the children of his followers in the past, Draco had expressed dislike of them, and gave off the impression that Lucio was too good to socialize with them.

"I'll have to approve of them beforehand, of course," he continued, looking thoughtful. "I suppose we have neglected him in that regard, but it's helped him develop his own identity without outside influence. At least when I go out I can defend myself. He's only a child."

"They wouldn't target him," she said stiffly.

"Do you really want to leave that to chance?" he asked, his voice sharp. "Give them an inch, sweetling, and they'll take a league. What better way to strike back at me for what I've done than to kill my only offspring?"

"Then give him your guards," she said. "We can train him to defend himself if that's what it comes to. But if you keep him in here, he won't learn how the world works."

"Then we'll teach him," he said. "Though I suppose most of that work will befall you considering my duties. I'll assist you as much as I can."

Though his offer sounded genuine, she knew the implication behind it.

You want to make sure I won't leave him too soft.

"I imagine this will work to our favor, too. It'll be an honor to the families of whoever we choose as his playmates."

Hermione sighed. She went to him and sat in his lap without him needing to order it.

Satisfied, he held her snugly in his arms and pressed a kiss to the edge of her mouth.

Lucio would be glad to have someone to talk to at last, but now she worried that another child (or children) in the Manor wasn't a good idea when Draco was so volatile.

"I'm tired of everything having to be about whether it favors us or not."

Draco chuckled. "That's how power works, Hermione. If there's an advantage to be had, we take it."

"I know that," she snapped. "I just said I'm tired of it. Of everything having to have an ulterior motive."

"That's never going to change," he replied calmly. "Get used to it."

His thumb smoothed over her shoulder.

"How did it go with George?"

Hermione stared into the fire, her eyes reflecting its light.

"He told me everything."

His hand pulled down her robe from her shoulder, so it gathered loosely at her elbow. He stroked her arm slowly, watching as the fine hairs along her skin raised.

"How do you feel?"

She turned to look him in the eye. "Be honest. Did you know?"

His brow furrowed slightly. "What specifically are you asking about?"

"He said that shortly after they raided your first manor, they decided to stop looking for me."

His brows raised. He seemed genuinely taken aback by that and it unnerved her even as she watched him closely to see if he were playing with her.

"No," he said after a second's pause. "I didn't know that."

Her eyes narrowed. "I'm having trouble believing that. Did you set this up on purpose, so George would have to tell me? Did you want me to lose control and attack him? Is that why?"

His hands came up to grip her shoulders gently. His eyes were serious.

"No. This is the first I'm hearing of it. I swear it, Hermione."

She settled slowly, still frowning.

"I only wanted him to tell you about what he's done in service to me," Draco said. "I hadn't really bothered to question him about his past. It held little interest to me."

That made sense.

"Why did they do it?" Draco asked. "Did he say?"

"They were struggling to fight against Voldemort," Hermione said, looking away. "And they decided to withdraw their focus in searching for me. He said they'd been wasting resources."

A contemptuous snort emitted from Draco.

"Fools. So that was their response to a couple of losses. Give up entirely? Their chances at victory would have substantially increased had they bothered to rescue you."

"That's exactly what I told him."

Draco grinned, squeezed her arm. "I'm glad to hear you agree."

"I'm still surprised you didn't know," she said. "I thought you were constantly keeping track of them."

"No," Draco said. He leaned back further against the couch so that they were nearly lying down and kept Hermione close to his chest. "I stopped keeping tabs on them after a while. I figured I had prepared enough with the head start I'd taken... I *relished* the possibility of being taken by surprise if they did ever manage to find us. But they never did. I told you how slowly they moved, but if they decided to abandon you then that's proof of their idiocy."

He kissed the top of her head. "Why do you think the Dark Lord allowed me to keep and marry you? I told him about how much you've helped Potter, and he likely saw that for himself when he interrogated you. He knew your value and agreed you were better kept as far from Potter as possible. He wouldn't have cared if I'd killed, sold, or married you as long as you were out of the way. Everyone could see the advantage you gave Potter but he himself."

That naïve note he had left on her bed....

Promise me you won't come after us. You'll be safe here.

She tried not to flinch at the memory.

Draco's hand came to her chest, pressed over her heart. His other hand was on her flushed cheek.

"I feel your anger," he said. "You have every right to be angry. Every right. I knew how close you all were—I thought they were more loyal than that. Even Longbottom has fought harder and come closest to helping you over anyone else, but I suppose that's because I killed Potter before he got the chance to. But to make that decision... I wouldn't take that sitting down."

"It's done," she said stiffly. "I can't change what happened. They're all dead and I'm still here."

"That may be, but just know that if I had been in Potter's place, I would have razed the earth until I'd found you. And if anyone had tried to pull me away from that, they'd be strung up in our dungeon."

Our dungeon.

She didn't like the sound of that.

I'll never use it.

Draco considered for a moment.

"If you want to punish George, I'll allow it."

“No,” she said. “It wasn’t his idea, and everything he’s gone through is punishment enough.”

Draco caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger, turned her face to look him in the eye.

“And Longbottom, then?”

“He obviously didn’t agree with it if he’s been still looking for me all this time. Why would I want to punish him?”

“Because he didn’t even try to change their minds.”

“That’s conjecture,” she argued.

“Maybe he did, maybe he didn’t,” Draco said dismissively. “The only way to know is to talk to him.”

She held his stare.

“When?”

“Whenever we manage to catch him.”

“You won’t touch him when we do,” she said. “You will leave him to me.”

Draco raised a brow. “And what will you do with him, firebird?”

She took a moment to reply, but when she did it made Draco smile.

“We’ll see.”

“Then he’s all yours, my love.”

His hands roamed down towards her hips, relishing the feel of her curves along the way. His lips pressed on her neck. His breath was warm against her face. He began to push his hands underneath her skirt.

Hermione took hold of his wrists, stopping him.

He stopped and looked back at her, expectant and curious.

She held his eye and released his wrist. A metal cuff had appeared on it, and he felt the soft tap of her wand on the other, and then the cold and heavy weight of the other cuff as it forced his free hand behind his back and joined the other to it.

Excitement ran through him like a dart, ending just below his navel. His cock began to stiffen. He smiled, testing them.

“I could break out of these with half a thought,” he said. “And I could push you up against that wall and take you any way I want.”

“You said I would have my turn,” she said. “Well I’m taking it, now.”

He smiled. “I didn’t actually think you would want to do this. Please, continue.”

She watched him for a moment, then pointed her wand at him and divested him of his clothing, piece by piece, until he was nude before her.

The entire time he kept her stare, as if challenging her. He stood proud and elegant, his body chiseled and daunting, his form appearing as if carved by Michelangelo himself. He was erect, his pupils blown wide—she could almost feel his lust like a current of electricity between them. She saw his hands flexing into fists, still restrained by the cuffs, as if he were barely able to contain himself.

Undaunted, Hermione undressed herself next, making him wait as more of her body was revealed with every passing second. Draco was not a patient man. He made to click his fingers and spell the rest of that pesky fabric away, but her voice shot out as if she knew his intention.

“No. You only do what I tell you to.”

He almost melted. A lustful shiver ran through him. His cock demanded attention—it twitched now and then as if to beg for stimulation. He almost reached down for it, but their stares were connected, and he was loath to rip his away when she was looking at him the way she was. The threat in her eyes was deliciously dark.

Hermione came to him then—his eyes roved over her figure, over every spot he aimed to mark, to bite, to fill. Anticipation wound inside him like a coil. She stood before him, so close his erection grazed against her front and her chest was a whisper away from his. She looked up into his face and he found himself instinctually leaning forward for a kiss but she turned her head, rejecting it so that his nose trailed along her cheekbone.

He pulled back, more excited by the second.

“What did I just say?” she asked coolly.

“To do only as you tell me.”

She raised her brows.

“Did I tell you to kiss me?”

“No.”

She reached up and held him by the jaw, locking their gazes together. If he had been melting before, he was a puddle now.

“No, what?” Her eyes were menacing and bright. He’d never seen such beauty.

Whether this was the result of the Horcrux or the reveal of the betrayal of her friends, or even both, he didn’t care to consider. The change was more than he ever could have hoped for, and he was beyond thrilled to see what more it had in store for his witch.

His throat bobbed as he swallowed in anticipation. She was so near he could just take her by the hips and with some careful angling, drive himself deep into that perfect cunt. Even now, he could push her front-first onto the bed and punish her for the sheer audacity of ordering him about and denying his kiss, regardless of whether he had approved it or not. It was the hottest thing he could have imagined, even as it slightly irritated him at the same time, as he was long unused to taking orders.

But the thrill of the novelty and the shift in dynamic had arrested him, and held him now in a vice grip, even as his dominant nature rebelled against it

His tongue came out, ran over his bottom lip.

“No, my Lady.”

There was another tap of her wand and a stiff leather collar encircled his neck. Draco started in surprise. His vision was almost entirely clouded with lust.

Her smile was almost smug. She smoothed her palm over his cheek. He would have bet his entire fortune that if he reached down and dragged his fingers along her slit, he would find her practically dripping. Her nipples were hard and it would only take the gripping of her shoulders and he'd push her onto the bed and devour those delicious peaks until she begged for him to fuck her. Restraints be damned, he would pin her to the bed and plow her until he was absolutely certain his next heir had been conceived. He would show her who was truly in charge.

But that look in her eyes...

You unleashed it, didn't you, sweetheart? He asked her. *You gave in completely.*

She stared at him with no expression, but he saw her answer in her stare.

How did it feel? He asked.

How do you think it felt? she said coldly.

He nodded. That sense of power was addicting. It gave him a rush at times, still. To lay such waste, to be able to bend things to his will... addicting. And he saw that it had sparked that similar hunger in his wife, as well.

This is how you always could have been had you not resisted me for so long.

No, she said. This is how I could have been if you'd had my consent from the beginning, instead of cheating your way to gaining it.

She ran her hand down his chest, agonizingly slow. Draco bit back a groan, wanting her to go lower down. Wherever her hand trailed left a path of seared nerves.

Her other hand gripped him by the collar. She made him lean forward so she could whisper in his ear.

“A collar suits you better than it ever could have suited me.”

He was so aroused he almost felt dizzy. He wanted to reach down and stroke himself or grab her, but kept still, awaiting her next order.

*You can put one on me all you like, he thought to her, but you'll do well to remember that outside these games, **you obey me.***

She smiled.

Draco watched her carefully, awaiting her next move.

If she had wanted to take him by surprise, she had achieved that through and through. He remembered the promise from the day before as they'd fucked but hadn't quite believed she would go about it this way, or that she would even enjoy it.

I barely allowed myself to hope, he thought to himself. An Imperius would have done the trick, but I wanted it to be real.

“What would you have me do, my Lady?” he asked.

He saw the rush of gooseflesh that rolled out over her skin. Her pupils were dilated and his must have been, too.

“Get on the bed.”

She went with him too and sat against the pile of pillows at the headboard. His eyes wouldn’t leave her body. She sat there, met his eyes again and opened her legs, bending them at the knee so that they stood as high as her shoulders.

Draco was on the end of the bed on his knees, staring where her hand snaked down and began to rub.

“I want you to sit and watch,” she said.

He could have whined in disappointment. She was already wet and glistening, just as he’d predicted. Her fingers rubbed away at her nub and he watched, almost salivating as she closed her eyes and leaned back.

Occasionally she would moan and her hips would push up but she kept a slow pace. She squeezed her breast, pinching and rolling at her nipple with her free hand. He could see her cunt clenching in pleasure, as if inviting him closer. She was so deliciously wet he could hear the wet friction of her fingers against herself. It was more beautiful than any song he’d ever heard. There was a small puddle of precum on the comforter that had dripped from his cock—it was almost painful how hard he was—he would burst if she didn’t let him free. He kept flexing his hands into fists behind his back.

She was nearing climax—her eyes opened and she spied him there, miserable with impatience and horny beyond all belief.

Slowly, she pushed two fingers inside herself and began to thrust, moaning more loudly. Her hips pushed against her own hand.

Draco burned.

She opened one eye and met his stare.

“Would you like to join?” she asked, her voice throaty and almost breathless. A sly smile teased her mouth.

He was on her in an instant and were it not for his restrained hands he would have grabbed her around the waist and plunged into her.

“Unleash me, wife,” he said, pressing kisses to her thighs.

Her foot pushed him away roughly. He balanced on the bed carefully, narrowly avoiding falling off.

“I asked you a question,” she said, sitting up. “I didn’t say you could touch me.”

Draco flared. He rid himself of the cuffs with a jerk of his wrists, mounted her, shoved her into the mattress roughly, snarling.

“Remember I could break free easily, sweetheart. Instead of entertaining this little game of yours, I could tie *you* down and fuck you thrice over in each hole until you think twice about ordering me around.”

“*You were the one who agreed to this,*” she hissed. “Are you so threatened by not being in control that you can’t handle this ‘little game’?”

She gripped his collar, tugging him down so that they were nose to nose. Her teeth were bared.

“Is this too much for you, darling?”

His glare could have crumbled mountains. “Don’t play at denying me what’s mine.”

She smiled again, and the hand against his chest traveled down his body until it wrapped around his erection, gave him a slow tug. He barely repressed a shudder.

“If you dislike it so much, then why are you so aroused?”

Her tone was mocking. He distantly recalled having said something similar to her on many occasions past. Her eyes were full of malice. He could have ground her into dust.

Instead, he reached up to press his thumb into her mouth, angling her head upwards to meet his eye more closely.

“Because I know one way or another, I’m going to have you tonight,” he replied, his voice almost guttural with want. “How will you have it be, sweetheart?”

She bit him.

He felt no pain but wrenched his hand away in surprise, not having expected it. He felt the throb of an injury and blood welled from his finger. At the same time, his erection throbbed more insistently, aching with desire that had flooded him suddenly. He was glad she had released him, because he was sure she might have tried to snap it in two in the same moment she’d bit him.

He healed himself. She was watching him, a triumphant gleam in her eye, but saying nothing.

How many times had he wished she would bite him, too? Regardless of her intent, it turned him on so much that he was hardly even conscious of his next move. She had sat back up and at once he seized her by the hips and knelt closer, made to have her sit on his cock—until something sharp pressed into his throat and her other hand was gripping his shaft, her talons present and a hair’s width from severing him in two.

He froze. He heard his heart pounding in his ears.

Hermione leaned in to whisper into his ear.

“*I am in control here.*”

Gooseflesh erupted over his skin in a tidal wave. He felt his balls tighten as if he might come at that very second.

She gave him a slow, menacing stroke. Draco grit his teeth, trying to calm his desire. Her talons dragged gently along him—his breath caught both in the sensation and the apprehension but there was no damage or pain.

“Do you understand?”

When he didn’t reply fast enough he felt one sharp talon press into his ballsack. His cock jerked and even through the (now clearing) haze of lust, he felt a pinprick of fear.

“Yes, my Lady,” he said.

She smiled and withdrew her talons. “Good. There won’t be another warning.”

She took him by the chin and gave him a short kiss. “Now stay as you are.”

After restraining his hands again, she resumed playing with herself and torturing him with the view. The seconds crawled by. Draco’s restraint was worn so thin it took a fair amount of energy to hold himself back. He was not used to being made to wait like this, and it annoyed him so much he wanted to go through with his threat and unbind himself and take her anyway, but he remembered how easily her talons had ripped his throat open before and imagined what they might do with his genitalia.

Would he feel pain from it? No, not likely, if how she had gored him recently was proof. But he was by no means eager to see such a dear part of him mutilated and wasn’t keen on testing whether it could grow back or not if she cut it off entirely. He wasn’t quite sure the Horcrux could perform *that* sort of miracle.

He was softening. Draco focused away from those thoughts and went back to watching his wife finger herself.

He was not used to this. He knew what she wanted and told himself it would not happen. But his patience continued to dwindle. And surprisingly, despite his annoyance, he was more aroused than he’d ever been in his life. Painfully so, just as she’d been too pleased to point out.

He recognized when she was about to come. He saw the little jerks of her hips, the unrestrained pleasure of her expression, the twitching of her thighs. Her pace was faster now, and it only took a matter of seconds until she came with a loud exclamation. Draco watched it all avidly, wishing it were his fingers inside her, his mouth over hers as she gasped.

Inside, he warred with himself over whether to speak or not. The words were ready on his tongue:

Free me, sweetheart. Let me touch you. I won’t last much longer like this.

But he didn’t want to beg. She was his by right, and he would not beg for something that was already a given. She would remember this was a game, and that once she’d had enough, these restraints would come off and be transferred back to her, and it would be her duty to submit.

And if you need reminding of your role, my love, I’ll be glad to help you remember.

She was sitting up, wiping her hand on the bedspread. Her cunt glistened enticingly in the dim light—Draco stared at it.

“Lie on your back,” she ordered.

He did so at once, watching in bated anticipation as she came over and straddled him, her hands bracing against his torso, her lower lips sliding so agonizingly slow over his length.

He couldn’t help the moan that dragged itself from his throat.

“Do you have something to say?” she asked sweetly. She had reached down and gently played with his ballsack.

“Let me in, sweetheart,” he gasped. His head pressed back into the mattress.

She let out a short laugh.

“Still making demands?”

She stopped abruptly. Draco bit his lip, forcing back his groan.

She took his hands, put them on her hips. They pressed in deep, pushed her into his groin as he ground against her, trying to angle his hips so that he could pierce her. Her hand prevented insertion.

“Sweetheart...”

Her free hand stroked his abdomen slowly.

“Yes, husband?”

“Move your fucking hand.”

She laughed. “So stubborn.”

She made to get off him. Draco’s hands clung to her, refused to let her break their contact.

She raised a brow.

“Was there something else you wanted to say?”

His eyes were glazed with lust, fixated on her and almost pleading.

“Please,” he made himself say.

“Please what?”

“Fuck me, my Lady.” She slowed to an excruciating grind over the head of his cock. He swore lo

Satisfied, she settled back over him. Her hand continued to rub at his chest.

“I expected you to last longer,” she said, sounding almost disdainful. “Somehow, I really did. You’re weaker than I thought.”

Anger flared within him at her words, but she was rubbing against him again, spreading her wetness on him, and it was enough to drive the insult away, but he made a mental note to make her pay for it later. Right now, all that mattered was that contact.

“Only for you,” he gasped.

She let out a long breath, as if trying to keep from moaning.

“Have you had enough?”

“Yes,” he heard himself say, sounding as if he were in pain. His hands twitched, restrained against the bed as they were. He longed to grip her, squeeze, hold her in place. Sweat dewed along his body in anticipation and desire. “Please—”

Hermione cut him off with her hand over his mouth.

“How sweet you sound when you beg,” she remarked. “I could get used to this.”

Enjoy it, he thought angrily, even as his hips pushed up against her. *It won't happen again.*

But that thought fled quickly—she was finally, *finally*, pushing herself down onto him slowly.

At last she freed his hands. Her heat enveloped his length completely—Draco hissed in pleasure, grabbed at her hips, grinding against her.

She moaned and began to bounce on him. Draco moaned, watching the way her body moved. He was so close already. It wouldn't take long. All she needed to do was go faster. Or he could release himself and pin her down and pound until she could no longer form a coherent sentence.

“I like you like this,” she said, slowing to look at him thoughtfully. “Tied up and following orders... I like it more than I thought I would.”

Draco panted for breath, but managed to give her a lazy smile. “You see how it can get addicting?”

“Don't even pretend that what you do to me is similar to this,” she said, narrowing her eyes. “We both want it now. From the beginning, you forced this on me without my consent. Of course I wasn't going to like it then.”

He chose not to respond. An argument in the middle of this was the last thing he wanted, especially when he was so close. She seemed to realize this at the same time and said nothing else.

It wouldn't take much longer now. He was almost there—he could feel it building up quickly. She was moaning, grinding against him and her hips were a sight to behold as they moved. He could tell she was almost there, too. He could feel the clutch of her body tightening around him. Her eyes were pinched shut, and within seconds it hit her—she bucked into him, her breaths rasping, her voice sweet and low. She had dropped low so that she was almost horizontal over him, curling into herself. Her hair was damp with sweat and it shone on her breasts—he wanted to pull her down and have his mouth on them. The thought spiked him dangerously close to climax.

On instinct, without thinking, he tightened his grip and began to thrust upwards into her at a ferocious pace, his expression one of tormented pleasure as his orgasm approached. Hermione sucked in a breath—her eyes had been closed for the duration of her climax and she hadn't seen it happening. He moved, as if about to roll her underneath him.

“No,” she snarled.

She took his hands and pried them from her body, her strength flaring with magic. She pinned them down again onto the bed, crouching over him, breathing hard. He slipped out of her in the movement and she had stopped moving—Draco groaned, clenching his teeth. He felt his orgasm falter and then continue, but at a much lower intensity than he had almost had. Cum leaked from his cock—he felt no satisfaction and little pleasure. Disappointment and annoyance clashed inside him.

She slapped him.

When Draco faced her again, she was breathing hard still, her talons exposed and inches from his throat. Her eyes were enraged, tinged red.

He froze her, equally furious.

She strained against his magic’s hold, trying to tear it down.

“I didn’t say you could move,” she said. One of her fingers managed to twitch. “And I *never* said you could cum.”

“It was a reflex, firebird,” he said carefully, looking into her eyes like she were a creature he’d encountered in the wild and hoped to tame. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“Clearly,” she snapped, indignant. “But you still disobeyed me.”

Another finger managed to flex against his freezing spell. Draco frowned, adding another over it.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m just used to being the one who makes the orders around here.”

She finally stopped fighting his hold and relaxed. Draco dropped his defenses, frowning.

“Yet you liked this.”

“I did.” He grinned. “Feel free to do that as often as you like. But I’ll want retaliation.”

She looked at him scornfully.

“Oh, heaven forbid that your preciously dominant masculinity is ever threatened.” She climbed off of him and stood from the bed.

Draco stood off the bed, magicking his semen from the sheets and his skin. Hermione had stood too, and had gone into the bathroom to turn on the shower.

He found her in there, testing the water’s warmth.

Draco went to her from behind, put his hand on her hip and pulled her back into him, his mouth grazing against her shoulder. His cock grazed against her ass.

She knew his want and pushed herself away.

“No,” she said. “You don’t deserve it.”

Steam had clouded the air in the bathroom, and it obscured her from his view as the shower door shut in his face.

Draco smiled and walked away.

A/N: I think I've been stretching myself thin for a while now, juggling two active WIPS. I'm going to be more careful moving forward to prevent another burnout. In the meantime, I am working on a little project to celebrate the ten-year anniversary of His Little Bird, so stay tuned on my social media (links in bio). I'll be posting bits and bobs of it on my Wordpress as well!

Thanks as always for your support xx

18. Hostage

SORRY FOR THE WAIT. THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR YOUR PATIENCE AND ENJOY.

Hermione awoke sharply at the sensation of lips on the nape of her neck, hands groping her, an erection rubbing against her ass. She felt overheated, wrapped in his arms, as if a boa constrictor had wound itself around her in her sleep. She blinked the sleep away from her eyes, stirring faintly as Draco breathed heavily against her. She felt his hand travel down between her thighs and grab hold of the gusset of her knickers, yanking it roughly aside. She heard seams tear open, her bunched knickers cutting into her thigh hard enough to leave a mark. His hand pushed between the fabric and her skin, probed into her, began to rub.

Furious, she maneuvered her arm out from the restraint of his hand and elbowed him in the ribs as hard as she could.

She felt rather than heard his exhalation of surprise—she had knocked the wind from him. But he let her go and she sat up quickly and got off the bed, adjusting her knickers, and glaring at him, shaking her head sharply to get her hair out from her eyes.

He let out a frustrated sigh and reclined back on the bed lazily, his hand tugging at his cock. His eyes were cool.

“After how well you’ve been doing, must I rape you now?” he drawled. “Are you so silly to come so far and then set yourself back at square one?”

He always delivered his threats so casually. Always flexed his power like it was nothing but a crumb to wield. Like that crumb was all he needed to check her and put her back in her place.

But he had gotten his way for too long, and she had been unable to fight. Even if she couldn’t harm him still, she could wear him down in other ways.

She felt her power simmering inside her. Pictured it like a thick rope—a whip—curling into her hand, ready for a strike.

She found her top at the foot of the bed and pulled it back on, almost shaking with anger. She hadn’t even felt when he had taken it off.

“You misbehaved last night and you know it.”

He gave her a dark smile.

“Sweetheart, I wasn’t aware we were still playing this game.”

“We are,” she said. “You disobeyed me. You gave me power and then undermined it when it wasn’t going your way, so no, it isn’t over. This is your punishment. *Stop touching yourself, you fool.*”

He looked angry, at first—even slightly surprised. But to her delight he obeyed, and his hands fell away from himself. His cock stood there, neglected and throbbing. She imagined he wouldn't have lasted long had she let him continue.

"Are you offering to take care of it?" he asked, raising his brows.

She laughed and got back onto the bed, crawled to him and knelt at his hips. She took him in her hand, stroked him slowly.

At once his hips thrust upwards—she was leaning forward to stare into his eyes. His pupils were so dilated they almost overtook his iris. It made him look like a shark.

"I'm enjoying this side of you very much," he said in a hoarse voice. She stroked again, watched him run his tongue over his lips. Hermione leaned forward, kissed him. He met her passionately, let his mouth open for her tongue to take. She felt him pulsing in her hand.

"*Fuck*," he groaned into her mouth.

She smiled.

"If you're good, we will."

She traced the defined head of his cock slowly with the pad of her thumb.

"And when will that be?" He was almost breathless.

"Whenever I decide."

Another stroke. Another. He hissed gently. He pumped into her hand.

"But on my terms," she said. "Not yours."

One last stroke, and then she withdrew her hand. Had she continued, he might have come in a matter of seconds.

Visibly disappointed, Draco exhaled heavily and on instinct, reached down as if to stroke himself to completion but catching her gaze, stopped midway and then set it back down.

They held their stare—she could sense his resistance, his resentment.

"Keep teasing me like this, and I'll end this once and for all," he said. "Damn this game. I'll do it, sweetheart. You know I'm not patient."

Her smile widened.

"Then learn to be."

She kissed him again sweetly. He returned it hungrily, but she cut it off before he could deepen it.

"You didn't know what you were doing when you gave me back my power," she said, her hand rubbing his chest, smoothing over the pale hair that spread over his pectorals. "You regret it—but you can't stop it now. And you're too curious to try to restrain me again."

He didn't reply for a moment, but when he did he raised his hand in a silent permission to touch her. She nodded, curious to see what he would do. She half-expected him to pin her down by the throat, and was prepared to attack if need be—her hands were on the brink of

assuming their talons, tingling with that anticipated transformation. All he did was reach out and stroke her cheek, his eyes guarded.

“I don’t regret it. Monsters grow lonely,” he replied, his voice low and thoughtful. “I had to create another to keep me company. You might scorch the earth with me. You might burn only me instead. But I’ll be there at your feet regardless of the outcome.”

That took her by surprise but she didn’t want him to see it. Hermione got off the bed again and grabbed her wand from the night table. She summoned a change of clothes from the closet and showered and dressed, taking her time. When she emerged, Draco was clothed and at the dresser, adjusting his cufflinks. His eyes raked over her as she approached.

Was that resentment in his eyes again? It was hard to tell, he was guarding himself well. If he was angry with her there would be no mystery about it—but she supposed that he would make his feelings known later on. She had seen last night, how allured he had been by the shift in their dynamic. She suspected he was (reluctantly) pliant for now thanks to the scraps she’d given him the night before.

But then morning comes and he gets bold again. I was lucky he didn’t spell me asleep or I might not even have known that he’d used me.

He held himself with an air of expectancy, so she approached him and he wrapped his arms around her, gave her a kiss much gentler than she’d anticipated, but as his hands lingered on her body and the want in the kiss grew more apparent.

“Do you know what you’re doing?” he teased, scraping his teeth gently against her earlobe. She fought not to shiver. “I’ll be on edge for you all day, my love. I’ll be a beast by the time I’m home, mark my words.”

“As if you already aren’t,” she replied. His tongue stroked her throat. “I’m not afraid.”

He nipped her suddenly, sharp enough to sting, but not hard enough to draw blood. She had braced herself, and barely repressed her flinch. He still felt it however, and gave a throaty chuckle that vibrated against her.

“I’ve got to check on some things,” he said, pressing another kiss on her. “I won’t stay for breakfast.”

“What a shame.”

He gave her a hard, playful slap on the ass. Just as quickly, she pierced his hand through the palm with her talons. He rocked back slightly on his heels, his mangled, profusely bleeding hand held out in front of him for inspection. She could see bone poking through the torn flesh. He angled his hand this way and that, admiring her work. There wasn’t a trace of pain in his face.

There was a subtle flash of light-his hand was instantly healed. Now it was his turn to grin.

“That’s it, you beautiful little devil. Bite me back.” Before she could react, he had rushed forward, crushed their lips together. His breath was rushed and heavy. She could hardly breathe. “Ruin me.”

She only just managed to break the kiss, gasping.

Draco took her chin in his hand and leaned in close.

"I might just tie you up and bring you along," he murmured. "My men would like that. I'll have you right in front of them. Spread your legs and take you deeper. I'll put that smart, pretty mouth to good use."

She jerked her head from his grip.

"Then they can watch as I tear your prick off with my teeth."

He grinned. "I'll let you do it to *them*, if you're that eager."

"You'll tell me about what you did when you're back."

"Of course, my love."

When he was gone, Hermione had lingered in the bedroom for some time after, relishing her solitude.

She sat on the bed facing the stained-glass window, deep in thought.

She hadn't anticipated enjoying the previous night as much as she had.

It made sense now that she had the time to analyze it.

She had always liked being in control. At Hogwarts as a student, she had thrived on structuring her timetables and her to-do lists, following them to the dotted line. With Harry and Ron, she had been the one whose word might make or break a plan, since they'd trusted her judgment. They had both disregarded her advice and had paid for it and though she had never gloated, she'd known firmly that if they had listened to her and done what she'd said, things would have gone differently, and for the better, at that.

Draco had ripped the control from her from the moment he had first assaulted her.

The threat of blackmail. The ongoing Imperio through the semester. The ring. Now all their bonds.

Shackled from the beginning.

She looked down at her hands, at her ring-free finger.

No longer.

He said he intended to put it back on her. She would not let that happen. He might be working on it now, adding even worse enchantments onto it to bend her further to his will and purpose. No. She'd had enough. Even if true escape was forever out of the question, she would *not* have the ring back.

It had felt good to rip his torso open. It had felt good to stoke his desire and then deny him. Very good. To turn the tables for once. And he'd resisted, yes—but then he had obeyed. She hadn't expected that, despite his promise to go along with it.

The heat in his eyes as he'd watched her pleasure herself—she'd known how agonizing it must have been for him to sit there and only be able to watch. The obvious want in every line of his body and the knowledge that she could either send him away to more misery or make him happy was enough to make the wetness pool between her legs.

Ruin me, he'd said. Strange that he wanted it-and he was clearly *enjoying* it, but he thought he was invincible, didn't he? As if he thought there wasn't a way she truly could damage him?

We'll see.

She had waited so long for this opportunity. She would not fail. Not this time. Whatever it took, she would do it. Even if it meant still going slow, gaining inch by precious inch.

Even now, knowing that wherever he'd gone he was surely thinking of her, was pleasing. He would be putty in her hands when he'd come home—and she couldn't wait to wring him out.

Little by little, one way or another, I'll make you pay for everything you've done to me.

He probably wouldn't come home for hours. With Lucio and Pansy occupied with the tutors as they were every morning, she had the rest of these scant hours for herself.

Part of her wanted to go for a walk, another long one. She would roam until her mind cleared. Slice up more greenery if need be. She was curious to see what else she could do.

Hermione stared at her hand, focused for a moment. She felt her magic react inside her and watched as her fingers transformed, lengthening and sharpening into her formidable talons.

It was so easy to transform. Transfiguration had always been one of her favorite classes... but this was different. McGonagall had mostly taught them to transform other things like teacups and quills. There had been a few glamour spells here and there. But never things like this.

If she extended her arm and wished for flight and feathers, would they spout from her skin?

She let out sarcastic laugh.

Draco would love that. She could picture his face clearly, the cool excitement that would set his eyes aglow if he ever saw her thoroughly transformed. He would see it as her accepting that stupid pet name he'd used for her from almost the start.

Although it might just work to my favor if I use it correctly...

The first time, the talons had come in the heat of the moment, at the crux of emotional turbulence during Draco's assault. From then on it had felt almost natural. But now, she had to concentrate-her thoughts were full, leaping around with excitement and anticipation.

But her power had not failed her yet.

It was an odd sensation as her flesh shifted. Not quite painful, but almost.

There was a sensation of something erupting from inside her and coming out sharply from her back. The force of it made her buckle and she clenched her teeth to keep back a juddering gasp. Fear threatened to destroy her focus but her mind was alert and actively aware of the feel of her body growing, of a new connection of blood and bone and now flesh that was forming so quickly it sounded like a ruffle of feathers. As they sprouted from that new

membrane she turned her head to look over her shoulder and watched in almost horrified awe at what she had done.

When it was done and her other wing had taken the same shape as its twin, she stood and went to the mirror. The first several steps were awkward as her balance was now different. She didn't dare think a single thing until she'd got to the mirror and stared at her reflection.

The wings were black and sleek, so large they exceeded her in height. She turned to look at her back, her heart pounding, so suddenly aware of their strange new weight and how they seemed to move almost frenetically, twitching and flapping once or twice in her disconnected panic.

Her wide eyes met their reflection.

I'm in it now.

This was beyond Transfiguration. McGonagall might have taught them to change the color of their hair, but this was advanced stuff. And she had done it without her wand, and without a *spell*, at that...

She reached behind her, but her wings seemed to anticipate her intent and folded forward around her, as if to cocoon her. Her hand was shaking but she touched it and almost gasped at the feeling of a new limb that had not existed minutes ago.

This could not have been borne from her magic. This was the Horcrux's doing. It had to be. She was becoming more certain of it by the second.

Her legs felt weak with excitement.

This might just be how I escape... but how do I know he can't detect me when I'm like this?

But why stick to a bird? She refused to let Draco define her. It was good to know she could do it. It was a weapon to hold in her arsenal. If she played it right and kept this from him until the right moment, it would deal some hefty leverage her way, and it was sorely needed.

Time to push it further—she closed her eyes, focused again. She might be able to give herself wings, but could a total transformation be achieved? If she tried to fly away she would be spotted so easily, and becoming a target in the sky was not what she wanted. Perhaps if she stayed closer to the ground... There was a strange sort of squeezing sensation this time and she felt herself shrink, felt her fingers join together on each hand, felt her legs twine together into one solid rope of flesh and bone and now scales, and her breathing was fast and nearly panicked but she grit her teeth and focused hard again, because there was no time for panic when she might have just found her way out.

When she dared open her eyes, her vision was so different she almost thought she was still dreaming.

Everything was in blurrier focus than before. She found herself trying to blink out of reflex but it didn't work—she had no eyelids. When she tried to move, her body rippled like water over the cool floor. The bedroom around her was enormous. Everything loomed impossibly high over her. She looked around wildly, highly aware of her newfound flexibility and lack of limbs. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and saw a small black snake staring back at her.

“Oh fuck,” she wanted to say, but she couldn’t speak. Her tongue, long and thin, flickered out of her mouth as she looked around. It actually helped her navigate. Had she turned off the lights in the room prior to changing, she probably would have had a better go at seeing her surroundings.

It was gone in an instant—she was back to normal, gasping as if she’d just sprinted across the manor, prostrate on the floor and staring down at herself, still expecting to see the scales and tail.

This is only the beginning, the voice came in, jolting her. Your husband crows of his own power. Wait until he sees how you will surpass him. The Reckoning will come, and he will know lasting pain.

Buzzing on her newest discovery and glad to have the rest of the morning to herself, Hermione found herself in the library, having been situated there comfortably with a book for the past half-hour. It was hot outside, the sun bright and clear in the sky, and Lucio was still at his lessons.

She had looked for books on Transfiguration and Animaguses but hadn’t found much—or at least, nothing related to what she wanted to know.

She had caught herself thinking, *I’ll just go to the Hogwarts library*, and stopped cold, picturing the ruins Draco had taken her to see not long ago.

Never mind. She would continue to explore her powers on her own. If Draco knew her sudden interest in books on that topic he would become suspicious, and the element of surprise might be lost. She would have to be very careful from now on, and practice often, but only when she was absolutely sure he could not interrupt—which was very hard to do, as he had proved impulsive in that regard many times.

I’ll have to hide this from Pansy, too, she thought, frowning. Even if I asked her to keep it a secret—she’s bound to Draco, first, and me by extension. If he demanded her to tell her whatever I’ve told her, she wouldn’t be able to refuse. Even if she wanted to.

There was the sound of somebody walking past the library. Hermione picked up her wand quickly, thinking it was Pansy, and pointed it at the double-wide doors, opened them.

It was George walking past, not Pansy.

Surprised, he stared back at her mid-stride, then stopped abruptly so that he was framed perfectly in the center of the door frame.

He bowed.

“My Lady.”

From this distance where she sat, with the sunlight from the corridor windows illuminating him from behind, he almost looked like his younger self. It called to mind the memory of him and his brother grinning identical mischievous grins at her when she had caught them using their contraband items once at school, long ago.

His formal robes were gone, replaced by plain dark robes that seemed more suitable for daily wear. A holster bound around his shoulders peeked out from underneath his cape, his new wand held securely within it. Another around his thigh held a series of smallish cylindrical cartridges. She wanted to ask what they held but sensed he might not answer. Likely healing potions. His boots were worn and rugged, the leather creased and bearing smears of dirt and dust.

Why was he wearing all this now? Was he arriving, or leaving?

"I thought you were someone else," she said.

"I was looking for my Lord," he said, clasping his hands behind his back, ever at attention.

"He left about an hour ago," she replied, setting her book down and walking toward him. "I don't know where or how long he'll take. I suspect if he needs you, he'll summon you."

"Very well." He gave her a questioning look. "Were you wanting something, my Lady? May I help you with anything?"

She wondered if Draco could ever watch her through George without his eye color changing. She stared carefully at him for a second, but nothing seemed amiss. It did nothing to put her at ease.

"No," she said. "I was just reading. Why did you need to speak to Draco?"

"My men sent word that they think they've found traces of Longbottom's presence in some abandoned house. We need his clearance to go investigate."

"Surely you could just go and show him with your sight?"

"Yes, but I thought he was still here so I'd let him know. He prefers to join when he can."

Of course he does. Draco loved a good hunt, didn't he? Especially when it proved so challenging, as she had once made it, and as Neville was making it now. He had to be relishing this.

Well, so what if Draco wasn't there? She had just as much authority, if he was to be believed.

"He isn't here," she reminded him. "But I am and I give permission. Report back as soon as you can. I want to know everything."

If he was surprised by this sudden change of events, he hardly showed it but for the split-second pause before he bowed again, his fist over his heart.

"Thank you, my Lady. We will not disappoint you."

Then he was gone.

She sat down again and tried to read with a randomly picked book, but her thoughts were too far-flung to concentrate properly. She stared at the pages as if that alone would help absorb the information, but at last she relented and snapped it shut, the muted *CLAP* sound it made echoing around the library.

It would be time for lunch soon, and she would have to meet with Lucio and Pansy. She doubted Draco would make it in time to join them, and wondered how soon she could expect George and the Eyes to return with their findings.

Hermione stood impatiently and held the book in the air. When the gentle current of magic hovering in the air caught it, she let it go and watched as it floated back to its designated location.

She felt restless again. Perhaps she should have gone for a walk rather than waste time here.

There was the sound of the door opening, and she turned to see Pansy hesitating there.

"Come in," she said, smiling in relief.

Pansy made her way over.

"Lucio's lessons have ended. He's in the dining room, since he wanted a snack."

Hermione smiled.

"How were his lessons?" she asked.

"He's as bright as his parents," Pansy said. "To be frank, I think he'll need new tutors soon if they don't update their curriculum."

"I'll send them a letter," Hermione said. "I hate that he feels so bored all the time."

Speaking of boredom, she still had invitations to send to Draco's pre-approved list of candidates worthy enough of socializing with his son. She'd been putting it off since she hadn't the faintest idea how to write such a silly thing. Wasn't it enough to simply pick up the phone and invite them? Draco would roar with laughter if she ever said that out loud—but no matter how long she had remained here in his grasp, her Muggle upbringing had never been shaken from her—not that he'd tried.

She could already hear his voice, lecturing and proud:

A lady writes a formal invitation. Even if she was to make a phone call, she would have a servant to do such things for her. Pansy doesn't know what a phone is, and our kind don't use phones anyhow, so it's out of the question, little bird. Write the letters and swallow your doubts.

Pansy was staring at her, and though her face was carefully neutral, Hermione could guess what she might be thinking.

"How are you feeling?" Pansy asked before Hermione had the chance to speak.

"I don't know," Hermione admitted. "I'm feeling several things at once. It makes it hard to concentrate."

"Is it a headache?" Pansy asked. "Let me get you a cold compress."

"No," Hermione said. "It isn't that. I have too much to think about, that's all."

"Okay... you don't want to take a walk?"

As tempting as that sounded, she really ought to write those letters for Lucio's sake. Hermione sighed.

"No. I've got some tasks waiting. Come. I'll get my things and we can keep Lucio company." Pansy followed dutifully.

"We'll have a long walk tomorrow," Hermione said, trying to sound cheerful. "Rain or shine."

"I look forward to it," Pansy said, smiling.

Once the letters had been dispatched and Lucio played with (he'd enlisted their help in building a replica of Hogwarts to the best of their memory out of building blocks), Hermione decided to go to the garden for a bit to stretch her legs. She had left Lucio and Pansy in the kitchen, where they had gone to wheedle the House Elf for another snack. To her chagrin, when she looked out the window, a heavy rain was falling and the temperature had dropped. Although she could have used her magic to protect herself from the elements, by then she found her enthusiasm for being outside had dulled considerably, so she promised herself she would do it the next day, and settled for wandering almost aimlessly around the manor with a heavy shawl wrapped around her shoulders.

It had taken an embarrassing two hours to write the letters. She had spent a good ten minutes sitting there, rolling Draco's quill between her fingers, trying to remember when the last time had been that she had written a letter. And when she had shaken herself out of that stupor, she had sat there in frustration trying to come up with a template for the letters that would sound *ladylike* enough for Draco's approval.

Pansy had caught on to her misery and helped her out immensely so that the end result was not as horrific as the first draft. Relieved to be finished, Hermione had set the template aside to share with Draco later, and had occupied herself in spending time with her son.

As they had played and read from books, Hermione had felt Pansy watching her from time to time and had seen caution in Pansy's gaze when she had looked at her. She had hidden it from her expression well, but that concern hung around her like an aura, and it was both touching and distressing to Hermione. She couldn't stop seeing that expression in her thoughts. It had been as if Pansy had been expecting her to lash out again like she had done the day before.

Hermione shook the thought away.

She shouldn't worry. I'm in control of myself.

Before long she found herself in the bedroom, settling on the bed for a nap. It had been a tiresome morning and she wanted to rest. It didn't take long for her to fall asleep.

Danielle's bleeding, floundering body filled her dreams. Her wet, bubbling gasps for air and her frightened eyes were all Hermione could focus on, and she held her so tight but regardless of her efforts, Danielle's body seemed to lose its solidity, and she was slipping through her grasp.

Still, Hermione grasped for her, trying to speak, but no words could come out.

I'm sorry, she kept hearing herself say. I'm sorry.

The dying witch only stared back accusingly, and it was her eyes still that remained in Hermione's mind's eye when she slipped further into sleep, and eventually, a new dream took form.

She was in an open field, full of golden sunlight and lush greenery that loomed so large above her that she felt almost like a child again. It was warm there, and the grass was soft underneath her feet. She walked aimlessly. A gentle breeze stirred, and birds sang all around. She felt herself relax more and more with every step, and it felt so good that eventually, when she had no strength left to keep walking, she lied down on her back over the warm grass, the earth thrumming underneath her, as if responding to her presence. The grass seemed to grow around her—flowers unfurled their petals like little blooming suns. She pressed her palms down onto the ground, closed her eyes—

And the heat was gone. The ground began to shake so suddenly she felt her stomach drop. Alarmed, she tried to hold on to the ground underneath her, to cling to the grass that now felt sharp and cold, and the sky was bleak and grey and her clothes were in tatters, and there was blood all over her. She could only look around wildly in confusion, trying to figure out what had gone wrong, and whose blood weighed down the hem of her skirt.

The ground opened then—there was a deafening CRACK and it sounded like it came from a short distance behind her, but after the crack there was a continued crumbling sound, and at once she knew it was coming her way and that she had to *move*.

She stumbled upwards but it was nigh impossible to stand properly when the world was shaking and the crack had already reached her and now yawned into a massive crevice.

It was too big a distance by now to jump to safety. She'd been caught on the edge and now flailed for balance, but the shaking earth almost tipped her backwards and she fell into the still-widening crater, not even able to scream through the terror that seized her throat.

She jolted upright into a sitting position, her heart pounding. She still felt as if she were falling for the briefest moment, and dizzy, gripped the sheets tightly.

The room was dark and the window covered. She heaved for breath, pushed her hair from her face.

Draco was sitting on the edge of the bed watching her. They made eye contact—she felt no surprise at his presence. Had he just arrived or had he been watching her sleep?

It took a moment for her to register the dream, and fully process the fact that it was now night.

"Are you alright?" came his voice.

"I think so." She let her hands release the comforter slowly. "What time is it?"

"Midnight," he replied. "I didn't expect to be away all day. The Elf informed me you've been sleeping since six."

"I was tired," she said. "Why did you take so long?"

He didn't reply for a moment, only continued to stare.

“What did you dream about?”

She shook her head. Already, she couldn’t remember much of what she’d dreamt.

“I saw her again. The woman I killed.”

He nodded, watching her carefully.

“Is that all?”

“No,” she said slowly. “I was falling in the other dream. Everything was shaking.”

He scooted closer, took her face in his hands. His thumbs brushed her cheeks, a gesture of affection, but Hermione knew he was checking for tears. She had shed none.

“Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I’m fine, Draco. It was only a dream.”

“It was only a dream,” he repeated, smiling strangely. “The shaking, the falling... And there was a crack in the ground that swallowed you, wasn’t there?”

“Yes,” she said, frowning, staring at him warily. Had he used legilimency on her while she had been asleep? A cold wave rolled through her. He had never looked into her dreams before—in fact, he hadn’t used Llegimency on her since their days at Hogwarts. “How did you know?”

“Because I’ve had that dream, too, sweetheart.”

He kissed her gently. Pulled back to look in her eye.

“I don’t believe in coincidences. Do you?”

Long ago, she had. But her opinion had changed since. Still, she didn’t answer, and Draco finally released her and stood, undressing.

He joined her in bed moments later, nude.

“Did you see Lucio?” she asked.

“Yes. I put him to bed,” he replied, laying on his side and pulling her body to tuck into his. He rested his chin over her shoulder. “He said he came to see you earlier to see if you would read with him but since you were asleep and Pansy was busy, he had George do it.”

She made a mental image of that and almost smiled.

“Why did you take so long?” she asked.

He took a deep breath. She felt his chest expand and press into her back.

“I’d neglected a few duties and they caught up to me. Had to sort them out. Nothing interesting. A bribe here, a threat there. Run of the mill. Then George came and told me they thought they’d found another Longbottom hideout. It wasn’t. It had been staged. He set a pathetic little trap. Took it apart easily enough.”

“What was the trap?” she asked.

He shifted, pulled her hair away so that it lay away from his face. His lips pressed against the nape of her neck.

"Well, what was it?" Hermione asked.

His hands slid upwards to cup her breasts, squeezed them gently.

She pushed them away.

"Tell me."

"They tried to ambush us," he said. "I took a hostage."

"Who?"

His hands snaked back up despite her initial resistance, grabbed her breasts forcefully. She grit her teeth in discomfort.

"Lovegood."

She went still.

"She's being interrogated as we speak."

"Don't you dare let them touch her."

His hands gentled.

"I figured you would say that. I passed on the message."

"If you're lying, I'll rip them all apart," she said. "Every single one of your *Eyes*. Even George."

"I'm not, sweetling," he said smoothly. "You can ask Lovegood yourself tomorrow."

"Now," she said. "I want to go now."

She tried to rise from the bed. His arms had tightened around her so she could barely move.

"Tomorrow," he ordered. "You're mine right now."

She settled down slowly, scowling. There was no arguing when he used that tone.

Pick the right time to start fires.

"What, you're not going to beg me to spare her?" he asked. "No tears for an old friend?"

"They're all going to end up dead anyway," she said, her voice flat and empty. "Sooner or later."

"Who will do it, then?" he mused. "You, or me?"

He let her deliberate.

"I will."

Her sleep was fitful. She awoke only an hour later, not having dreamt at all. Draco was still awake, seated and leaning against the headboard. His hand was on her back, having been stroking her there.

"Aren't you going to sleep?" she asked.

"I wanted to watch over you. I thought you might have another nightmare."

He seemed pensive.

"What is it?" she asked.

He slid down lower, wrapped himself around her, holding her from behind again.

"I had to check on Aunt Bella too, earlier."

"I haven't seen Bellatrix in a very long time," Hermione said, trying to ignore his hands creeping under the fabric of her shirt. His fingers found her nipples and began to tease them. "I thought she was dead for a while."

"She took Voldemort's death very poorly," Draco said. "Hasn't been quite the same since. She's never dared act against me for taking his place, but she also wouldn't cry if something were to happen to me."

Her nipples were stiff under his attentions. She felt pulsing between her legs. Draco's slow warm breaths brushed against her skin.

"You think she'd try to get rid of you?" she asked.

"No. I tolerate her misery as long as she remains obedient and she knows it."

Hermione scowled.

"You Imperiused her, didn't you."

"My aunt has always been unstable," Draco said nonchalantly. "She loved Voldemort. Her second stay at Azkaban and then his death made it worse. She needed to be guided or she would pose a threat not only to herself, but others. She didn't care much for our union. Why do you think you've never seen her all this time? She may be family, but I'd strike her down if she dared touch a hair on your head. Even under my control, I won't risk it."

"And her husband?" Hermione asked.

"He died years ago. Never liked him."

"Would you have done that to your parents if they hadn't approved either?"

"They approved it, firebird. Don't you remember?"

"Only because your father couldn't say otherwise, and you lied to your mother and told her it was consensual."

"And that way it worked out for the better," he said. "I worked hard and was rewarded for it. If either of them had objected, I'd have done it anyway, but no, I wouldn't have controlled them."

"Did you give her a ring, too?" she asked sarcastically. "Your aunt."

He let out a low chuckle.

"No. She has more freedom than you. But if my orders are ever disobeyed, she'll pay."

Hermione was quiet for a moment. He pulled gently at her nipples. She hated that she was already wet.

"If Lucio grew up to like boys, or if he wanted to marry a Muggle, would you take over his life, too?" she asked, and her voice was thick and spiteful. "Just to have your way?"

"Sweetheart," he said softly, holding her more closely to him until she had trouble breathing. "I don't care who he marries-as long as it isn't a Muggle."

"I'm Muggleborn, and you married me," she said. "What does magic matter? If I weren't a witch, would you have married me?"

"Yes," he said instantly, "and it would have been so much easier, too. I want him to marry someone with magic to keep our family strong. There will be no weakness here."

The hairs along her arms stood on end.

"Why didn't you just kill Bellatrix then, if she was such a concern?"

"She's still one of our best fighters. It's that simple." He paused. "You've never been concerned about her before. Why the sudden interest?"

"I had more important things to worry about," she said pointedly. Her hands went to his, tried to pull them away—he actually relented, but his hands wrapped firmly around hers, preventing movement. 'And it's terrifying to hear more about how far you go to control the women in your life.' She let out a short, mocking laugh. "For all your looks and power, you're *awful* with women."

"You're awful with men," he offered, not angrily. "Sweetheart, you had McLaggen, Potter, and I after you. Believe me when I say we weren't the only ones. I'd catch them staring at you all the time. Most of them were too chickenshit to approach you but McLaggen and Potter at least had more pluck. And you were too innocent to notice."

"Because I was too preoccupied with you," she said flatly.

"And I'd have it no other way." His hands were busy trying to lift up the hem of her nightie, pushed into her knickers to cup her intimately. "So innocent you didn't realize the trouble you were in because you wouldn't let yourself believe I actually wanted you."

His fingers rubbed at her.

"Well you believe me now, don't you?"

She shoved his hands away and rolled off the bed.

"I *believe* that your punishment isn't over," she said, glaring. "And you know it too but came in here acting like it wasn't."

He leaned on his side, supported himself up on one elbow and raised a brow at her.

"And how shall I be punished, then?"

“You don’t get to cum,” she said simply. “No touching yourself either until I allow it.”

He looked mightily displeased. He shifted on the bed, and for an instant she thought he might lunge at her, pin her back onto the bed, but instead he just sat on his knees, his body exposed and corded thickly with muscle. He was half-hard, his eyes heated as he stared at her.

“If it’s an apology you want, come back to bed,” he said, his voice dark and smooth. “Lie back for me, and I’ll make it up to you.”

Damn her body, but she was already reacting to his words. Her brow bent further.

“You can’t fix everything with sex, Draco.”

“Can’t I?” was his infuriating reply.

She would not give, and eventually he sighed and went back to his side of the bed, pulled out the covers from underneath him, and covered himself. His hands were clasped together over the blanket on his chest, and he gave her a pointed look as he did it. It was so absurdly comical that Hermione had to bite her lip to keep from laughing outright.

“Will this do?” he asked. “Come back to bed, my love. I’ll keep my hands to myself this time. I swear it.”

After a moment’s deliberation, she gave in and settled back into the bed beside him. Automatically his body shifted toward her, moving on instinct to grab her and tuck her into him, but he realized it and stopped short, pulled back to his side.

Pleased, Hermione touched his throat lightly, and the leather collar appeared again. His skin pebbled at its sudden weight and coolness against his skin.

“Only for you,” he said. “If it pleases you, my Lady.”

“Good boy,” she said. “And it does, very much.”

He said nothing for a while. Hermione had curled into herself comfortably and was beginning to doze off. He watched her all the while. At last, he spoke.

“I want to hold you.”

She didn’t even bother opening her eyes to respond.

“I don’t want to be held.”

And she rolled over onto her side and fell asleep again.

The next morning, when she awoke, Draco was long gone.

She sat up, inspecting herself quickly, checking for signs that he might have used her, but there were no red marks, no soreness around her body, no telltale fluids leaking from anywhere.

She sighed with relief and gingerly touched her lips. Not puffy and tender from vicious kisses.

So he had left her alone after all.

Or he did rape you in your sleep after all and cleaned up after himself. Don't let your watch loosen.

Of course not. She wouldn't be so foolish to really believe it. Perhaps he had caved and held her at some point in the night, or touched her gently enough to leave no marks. He could never be trusted.

She bathed and dressed, and since she was up so early, went to wake Lucio.

They had a merry breakfast together with Pansy, talking pleasantly and enjoying their food.

Lucio didn't want to go to his lessons.

"I don't feel well," he said when they had finished and risen from the table.

"Does your tummy hurt, my love?" Hermione asked, squatting down to catch him within the loop of her arms.

"Yes," he said, but there had been a split second where he had visibly debated whether that was the answer he wanted to go with or not.

"Do you think you're going to throw up?" she asked, pressing her cool palm to his pale, chubby cheek. He felt absolutely fine but she figured she would go along with it. Perhaps he really might be ill.

He nodded.

"Pansy," Hermione called. "Do we have anything for an upset stomach?"

"Yes," Pansy replied. "I'll go get them."

"But I don't want to take medicine," Lucio protested, pouting.

"It will help you get better more quickly," Hermione replied, adjusting the collar of his sweater. "I don't want you to be in pain. You can skip your lessons for today, but you can't play outside and I'll have your assignments for tonight sent over."

"I can't go outside?"

"Not if you're ill, you're not. You'll need to stay inside and rest, my love."

He made a face, and she knew at once he was regretting his decision.

"Or," she raised her brows, "do you think it's going away?"

He concentrated hard, his hand on his stomach. Then nodded firmly. She bit back a laugh.

Pansy had arrived with the medicine.

"Thanks," Hermione said. "I guess we don't have need for it, now."

"Is that so?" Pansy asked, smiling. "What a relief."

There was the sound of the knocker at the door downstairs, booming and quick, to signal that Lucio's tutors had arrived.

“Shall we?” Pansy asked, holding her hand out to Lucio.

He appeared torn.

“Are you sure you’re feeling better?” Hermione asked. “If you are, you can go play outside if you’re very careful.”

He seemed to be weighing his options silently, and, with a glum look on his face, took Pansy’s hand and they walked out of the room. Hermione bit the inside of her cheek to hide a smile.

The group of them had barely closed the door of the nursery behind themselves when there was another booming knock.

Martin had arrived.

Pansy was already rushing to get it, but Hermione saw her and gave a wave of her hand, as if to say, *I’ll do it*.

Pansy paused and nodded. She went back toward the nursery.

Martin was surprised to see her at the door.

“Oh—hello. I mean, good morning, my Lady.” He bowed.

“Good morning,” she replied. It had been a good morning and so her spirits were high and her smile was genuine. She stepped away to let him in.

He stared, and then remembered himself in time to catch himself just before tripping over his own foot. Hermione noticed and pretended not to.

“How is your father doing?” she asked on the way to the library.

“Well, thank you,” he said. “I saw him just last night.”

“Have you no other family?” Hermione asked. “I don’t think I’ve heard you mention siblings or a wife.”

“My life is quiet,” Martin said, shrugging. ‘I only have my father and myself to look after. With my Lord’s generous patronage, I believe our days of struggle are a faint memory now, as long as we’re careful in the future.’ He looked around. “Is he not here today?”

“No,” Hermione said. “I’m not sure where he is, but I’m sure he’ll be home by tonight.”

They had reached the library, and now entered. The drapes on the windows were pulled back, and so the whole room was beautifully soaked in morning light. Martin stopped short for a brief second to admire the scene before going further into the room.

Martin is here, Hermione sent to Draco.

Good morning to you too, little bird. And good. I forgot about him, actually. I’ll set his things up.

True to his word, a second later, Martin’s easel and supplies appeared in their usual spot beside a window. The large canvas had its back to her. Hermione walked toward it.

Where did you go?

Out and about. If I can't have you until you're satisfied I've been punished enough, I've got to expend all this energy somehow.

How did you sleep?

Well enough, my wretched wife, he replied, but his tone was light and teasing. But I always sleep best when I can touch you. I came so close, a few times.

Think of it as an exercise in restraint, she said archly.

Maybe I did it anyway.

Do you really want to test how long I can make this go on for?

Silence.

I thought so.

Martin had already gone to his things and was sorting out his palette for the day, his smock tied behind his back. The light coming in from the window flattered him a good deal but he didn't notice, preoccupied as he was with setting up his station. His eyes were focused and he had a paintbrush tucked into the waistband of his pants, the clean bristles pointing upwards. He had rolled his sleeves up to his elbows. Hermione found herself appreciating his appearance for a little too long, froze, and turned away abruptly.

"Will you be needing anything?" she asked.

"No, but thanks," he said. "I wouldn't want to trouble you with anything, my Lady."

"Hermione."

"Right. Sorry. Hermione."

"Well, call for Pansy if you do," she said, and left the room quickly.

It was warm outside but overly humid. Almost stifling, in fact. She walked quickly, eager to put distance between herself and what had happened in the library. She had just made it to the gate when she realized Pansy wouldn't be able to come with her, as the day before she had promised they would take a walk together. Lucio's tutors would not leave for another couple hours.

Hermione turned abruptly and went into the garden, plunging into its green depths.

Draco had initially insisted on landscapers to keep it as meticulous as possible. The winding paths were neatly paved, every bush and every plant had its own designated location and was not allowed to reach past it or entwine with another unless necessary for its own survival. It was a beautiful garden, sure, but Hermione had hated the sterile feel of it; so groomed and so contained it felt more like a display room than an actual natural space.

Somehow Draco had sensed this and allowed the landscapers to still come frequently, but only for the mowing of the lawns. The rest was allowed to breathe, and slowly, Hermione had ventured out into the garden more and more.

It felt better now. She walked along the path, toeing off her shoes to let her feet absorb the heat of the concrete.

The voice came, unprompted.

You want him.

She frowned.

I was just admiring the way he looked. It looked like something out of a film, that's all.

No, the voice insisted without judgement. *You want him.*

Hermione automatically looked around, nervous, as if Draco had heard these thoughts not meant for him and had materialized behind her, ready to punish.

Go away, she said to the voice.

Take him.

Hermione stumbled, edging off the path and nearly going right into a slightly overgrown rosebush.

No, she thought, aghast. She righted herself slowly.

He would not refuse you and you know it.

Draco would know. He would be furious. Apoplectic. It would set me back to having no magic again. You think I came all this way just to make a stupid mistake like that and set myself that far back?

Perhaps he would not be as angry as you think.

Hermione scoffed inwardly and turned away, as if that would silence the voice.

I belong only to him.

How many times had he drilled that into her head over the past years? So many, it was dizzying.

And the one time I defied him, I paid for it.

Memories streaked across her mind. Painful ones.

The voice pressed again, undaunted.

Things are different now.

Not different enough that he would let that pass, she snapped. *Let it go. I don't want Martin.*

The voice did not respond, and she was glad.

I don't, she thought again, to no one in particular.

He was decently attractive. Somewhat meek. Not strong, nor beautiful as Draco. If he had gone to Hogwarts, she might never have taken notice of him, and that had nothing to do with his appearance but for the mere fact that she had hardly taken any notice of boys in that time,

and the only reason she had paid attention to Draco was because *he* had been the one to always come up out of the blue and antagonize her.

But she liked talking to him. He had a calming presence, and she loved to watch him paint. His passion for it was clear not only through his skill but the way his demeanor grew more confident as he worked. A man who knew what he was doing, was good at it, and did it without making a show of it... like Harry playing Quidditch.

Hermione sighed, reaching forward to thumb at a white rose, trace the lip of its petal gently. A fat bee drifted lazily by as a breeze blew.

She did not want him. She admired him. His freedom, his skill, his simple life. What she would give for her own equivalent.

Liar.

Unbidden, her brain conjured forth an image of them together, their bodies slick and pressed together, his hips pushing into hers in a slow rhythm.

She winced.

Don't.

Her hand slipped, caught on a thorn. There was a slight flash of pain. She sucked on the wound.

He would be a much gentler lover. Not cruel and aiming to leave her sore and bruised like Draco.

She wondered if when she had been posing for her portrait, in that seductive pose Draco had forced her into... if Martin had come close, and she had pulled him in and taken his mouth, would he have reciprocated? And would she have dared to continue?

Her thumb was still bleeding—a fat, bright drop of blood had welled up and begun to drag its way down to her first knuckle. She focused on that and chose not to acknowledge that her knickers were damp with arousal.

The voice returned.

You have no ring. Without his enchantment, he won't know. Not if you are careful with your thoughts.

He will know, at one point or another, Hermione replied woodenly. *He always does, and I have enough secrets to hide.*

Then you will teach him a lesson for daring to control you, it responded. *You defied him once before, yes. And you lived.*

Against my will.

Your standing is more equal to his than it was last time. Tear him apart. Tell him he no longer satisfies you.

But he does.

Then tell him it isn't enough and you want more.

He'll kill him.

Not if you play it right. He tells you to take what you want. You are no longer leashed. Are you so afraid of freedom?

I don't want him to get hurt.

The voice laughed—it was strange, to hear her own warped voice laughing, both familiar and terribly strange.

He was doomed the moment your husband met him. Just like you. Just like anyone else who comes into his path. There is no saving anybody here.

A couple hours passed before she dared enter the library again. She didn't know when Draco was due back, and had been thinking of Luna.

She did not want to kill her old friend. But it was better than let Draco do it. Better than let her continue to suffer wherever she was, because Draco surely would not let her go at any cost—even if Neville tried to bargain.

At least, not alive.

She had tried finding where the dungeons were—if this new house even had any. She had tried the fireplace first, remembering how the secret passage in the first house had been concealed there in plain sight all that time. But nothing had worked, and neither had any of her other attempts in various places around the manor.

Frustrated, she had given up, not knowing what even had driven her to search so thoroughly.

Not worry—Luna had to still be alive enough to be able to talk to her if Draco had promised it. Not a rageful vengeance to free her, because she knew there was no way she could save her or even let her physically escape the manor.

She found she was merely curious, and it worried her a little, knowing that mere months ago she would have been tearing the whole damn place apart, raging with fear and desperation to save her former classmate. But all she felt now was that cool, curious detachment. She knew Draco wanted to get a reaction from her by presenting her old friend in chains, locked up in a cell. She would not give him that satisfaction.

Now, however, she had to admit she had been defeated in her purpose. She would have to grit her teeth and wait until Draco got home, and damn him over and over inside her head.

Martin was still painting, leaning but a hair's width from the canvas.

The door shut sharply behind her, and he jumped, staggering back, his paintbrush high in the air.

"My Lady," he gasped. "I'm sorry—you frightened me."

"I didn't mean to," she said quietly. She approached the canvas. "How are you getting on?"

"I let myself get caught up in details I usually save for later," he said with a rueful, soft chuckle. "But the head is mostly finished."

Indeed. Hermione turned to the canvas and saw Draco's face, incredibly lifelike, staring back at her with those cold, ruthless eyes. She felt her nipples harden, her skin pebble.

"As unsettling as the real thing," she murmured.

He nodded before he caught himself.

"Tell me," Hermione said, looking back to him. "How are magical portraits animated?"

"Through a special enchantment," Martin said, "It's rather difficult but is used when a portrait is finished, and if done correctly, can give impressive results."

"How many have you animated?" she asked, smiling.

"Nearly all of them. My first several tries weren't successful."

"I would love to watch when you do it," she said. "Draco said he wants these animated."

"Once the last of these commissions are completed, I will do it whenever is convenient for you, my—Hermione."

Hermione had looked back to Draco's likeness.

"The enchantment only animates it. The only magical portraits I've ever seen were in Hogwarts, and there were so many different personalities it could make your head spin."

Martin was nodding.

"The enchantment doesn't capture personality, does it? It only lets them move?" He nodded, and she frowned. "How is that achieved? Another enchantment? A ritual? Blood?"

"No, thank Merlin," Martin said, laughing in surprise. "No blood needed. The sad truth is there's no enchantment for it. The only way to infuse the portrait with personality is to have the subject spend time with it, talk to it, to let the portrait absorb it. It happens quickly, so I'm told."

"Strange," Hermione said distantly. "That surprises me."

"Magic can't do everything, I'm afraid," Martin said, shrugging.

She had moved closer to him until they were almost shoulder to shoulder. Her heart raced.

"No," she agreed. "It can't."

She raised her hand slowly, touched him where his sleeve had been pulled back and revealed a surprisingly muscular forearm.

He went still—she had been holding her breath, and when no pain came, let it out in an inaudible rush.

Their eyes met. He was staring at her, hardly daring to utter a word.

She had the strangest impulse to grab his hands, press them onto her body. She almost did. Ultimately, she stayed as frozen as he was.

Her fingers traced a line gently down on his skin. She could feel the gooseflesh raising there under her touch.

“My lady-?” his voice was quiet-fearful.

“I’m not wearing the ring anymore,” she said. “That’s why there’s no shocks. The times I’m able to touch somebody else and not feel pain are excruciatingly rare.”

She withdrew her hand. “Will you come to work tomorrow?”

He appeared dazed, like he still had no idea what had just transpired. His eyes had darted nervously to the door, as if expecting to find Draco there.

“Yes,” he said.

“Good,” she said. She reached up, found a fleck of paint on his nose, wiped it off. “I enjoy your company. You don’t fill me with dread.”

He swallowed.

I’m home.

She sighed.

Welcome, my Lord.

She heard Draco’s steps leading up to the library, giving her time to take two discreet steps away from Martin.

He greeted Martin with his fastidious Lordly manner, and they talked for a moment about the progress of the painting, and whether Martin needed more supplies, to which he humbly insisted he had enough. Martin took his leave, and when they were finally alone, Draco looked at his wife expectantly.

“Shall we do this now?” he asked, holding his arm out to her.

She took it.

“Take me to her.”

A/N: I was today years old when I realized legilimency is spelled LEGILIMENCY and not legimency... RIP. I’m a doofus.

I also used to read Wormtail as Wortmail...

I might have a problem...

19. Petite Mort

As always, thank you for your patience and support! Check out my blog on Wordpress for news and artwork. (Actually, check my profile on Archive of our own for links because FFNET is a dum-dum who hates hosting links for some reason.

For those of you who follow What We Know of War, there will be an update later this week!

Her previous searches had proved fruitless, and it was no wonder why. In their last home, the entrance to the dungeons had been concealed within the fireplace. Here, the entrance was outside the manor.

Draco led her outside without a word, past the gardens and to a nondescript patch of land not too far from the pond.

He turned to Hermione.

“Lay your palm on the ground and tell it what you want.”

She looked at him warily, and he stepped back to fall in line beside her.

A gentle breeze blew—it stirred her hair as she bent low to the ground and obeyed. The grass was soft, slightly wet and cold as she pressed her palm to it.

“Open,” she said.

A rumble began in the ground—she stepped back, almost bumping into Draco, her recent nightmare still prominent in her head. He put his hand on her shoulder, putting pressure on her to help her stabilize as the earth moved underneath them.

Rather than a crack, however, a hole began to appear in the ground as earth shifted and crawled back on itself to reveal its secret. Stairs carved themselves into the ground, leading deeper and deeper down at a walkable incline. It happened in the span of seconds, and Hermione stared at it, frowning.

She looked at Draco, demanding answers.

“It seemed too obvious to keep the dungeon within the house,” he said. “I was a little more creative this time around.”

The rumbling was easing up by then, and within seconds, stopped. Hermione made to venture down first but Draco caught her by the waist and hauled her back.

“No,” he said gently. “We go in together.”

He hooked his arms around her back and the backs of her knees, lifted her up easily. Hermione clung to him.

“No claws this time?” he asked teasingly as he began their descent.

“If I feel you’re not going fast enough, they’ll make an appearance.”

He let out a huff of laughter.

They found Luna standing in her dim cell, having heard them coming.

Draco was still carrying Hermione. She knew his aim, that he wanted it to appear to Luna that she had become as egotistical as him, to not even bother going down stairs herself, but didn’t care.

He set her down carefully, and she met their prisoner’s eyes.

She appeared unhurt. Sleep-deprived and cold, but unhurt. Her clothes were dirty but intact and her hair was disheveled, but as far as Hermione could detect, there was no evidence of blood or bruises. She waited to feel immense relief.

They stared at each other for a moment. Hermione thought back to the last time they’d seen each other. It had been a matter of weeks, and yet so much had happened between then that it felt like years.

“You knew at some point you would end up here.”

Luna’s gaze was sad but firm.

“I was never sure whether you’d still be alive or not by then.”

“Did any of them lay a hand on you?” Hermione asked.

Luna was frowning.

“No,” she said softly. “They didn’t use their hands to torture me.”

Her gaze was on Draco, and Hermione realized she had never seen Luna angry before. It transformed her face—in the shadows of her cell she appeared like a vengeful wraith. Hermione was reminded of the fine, lovely features of a Veela contorting with anger—she couldn’t help but wonder what trials Luna had endured all these years while Hermione had been in her own hell.

Hermione had learned much later on of their murders and injustices done to her friends and family. She had been in captivity this whole time—unwilling, but safe—to a degree. And Luna had probably been in the thick of it all from the start.

War doesn’t hesitate before innocence, and pain changes people.

She was sick to death of seeing how it had poisoned everything, and everyone.

Faint sympathy stirred within her. A distant part of herself tried grasping at it.

She was your friend, she reminded herself.

Draco stared back, unbothered by Luna’s calm but hostile stare.

“You didn’t expect five-star treatment, did you?” he asked coolly. “You’re the mate of my enemy. I’ve got no issue with you personally, Lovegood. But conspiring to abduct my wife is

where I've got a problem. If you were expecting a calm and polite interview over tea, you thought wrong."

"I'm not stupid," Luna said stiffly. "Don't expect me to fall at your feet and thank you for the *kindness* of not being raped."

"That can be arranged, if you keep mouthing off," he said, his voice toneless and deep.

Hermione's head snapped to the side, staring at Draco with such intensity that he said nothing more. Whether he was taken aback or angered by that she didn't know because he had no reaction to it.

That pleased her. She settled back down.

Luna had turned her gaze back onto her.

"He knows," was all she said.

Hermione nodded. "It always happens," she said. "It's only a matter of how long it takes. You were too late."

Luna shook her head in grim acknowledgment. "We tried, Hermione. For years, we've been trying."

"Where is Neville?"

"I don't know." There was sincerity in her tone, her eyes, but that faded quickly as she looked back at Draco. "I told your men the same thing. Neville never tells me where he's going in case something like this happens."

"You got yourself caught on purpose," Hermione said. "You've been so careful all this time not to allow hostages to be taken."

"We got your message," Luna said. "About what happened."

Desperation clawed at Hermione.

"*I told you not to come.*" Draco's hand wrapped around her arm—to reassure her, probably. She pulled away swiftly. "You're not going to live through this."

Luna's voice held no bitterness. "I know."

Hermione looked at Draco. "Leave us."

A brief flicker of surprise—and annoyance—crossed over his face. She held his stare, keeping her face smooth and blank as stone.

Don't you trust me? She asked him sweetly.

You sing your lies so convincingly, my love, he replied. *But you know there's no way to let her escape.*

I wouldn't dream of trying it, my Lord.

That appeased him a little. He furrowed his brow, issuing a silent warning.

See to it that you don't, firebird, or you'll be singing in pain tonight.

She went to him, sealed their truce with a kiss—he latched onto her, devouring the scrap she offered. And then he was gone.

Luna had been watching all the while. Her stare was a little apprehensive as Hermione walked back to her.

“I told you,” Hermione said simply. The warmth from his lips, the moisture of his saliva still lingered on her skin. She wiped it away. “I gave in. I have to give him what he wants so I can get what *I* want.”

“I don’t blame you,” Luna said. “I blame him. I want you to know that, before anything else happens.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t tell me where Neville is now that he’s gone?” Hermione asked.

“I didn’t lie,” Luna said. “I *don’t* know where he is. I can say that the last place I saw him was where I was taken. But we never Apparate together—he could have gone anywhere.”

“How do you communicate?”

“We still had those charmed galleons from fifth year,” Luna replied softly. “The charm needed to be refreshed badly. But it works. And I lost mine when they hauled me out.”

Hermione nodded.

“Are you going to hurt him?” Luna asked. “Or will it be Draco?”

“I want to talk to him,” Hermione said. “Draco already laid claim on Neville—I told him I would take care of you, because he’s a monster, and he’ll be cruel. He would make it last... he’d probably let others watch. I can’t promise that I can protect Neville... none of us will win.”

“Except Draco,” Luna said, her voice uncharacteristically low and grim.

“No,” Hermione said, shaking her head. “I’m going to find a way to make him regret all this. I’ll make him pay for everything.”

“When we got your message, I thought it was fake. I thought he’d forced you to tell us those things, that it was just a means to lure us out. Then we heard about Danielle.”

Hermione nodded.

“I don’t blame you for that, either. If they really were going to give her to Crabbe then you did her a favor—”

“I *don’t* want to hear it,” Hermione said suddenly, her sharpened voice bounding around the dungeon. “Sympathy can’t save me. I killed her. I got my magic back... I don’t regret it.”

The tearless nightmares. Danielle’s accusing, dying stare. Her hand pushing that dagger in deep. The red that unfurled over her like a thick blanket.

“There’s still a chance, Hermione,” Luna said imploringly. “There’s always a chance, you know that.”

“Time beat that out of me,” Hermione said, her tone resentful. “That, and my husband. There’s no getting away. Not permanently.”

"I'm here now," Luna said, dropping her voice so low, as if she thought Draco might still be lurking in the dark, listening. He very well might be, Hermione thought, but felt with certainty that this time, he had obliged her request for privacy.

"I'm here, I can help you," Luna said in a voice barely above a whisper. "Why do you think I let them catch me?"

Hermione felt her heart sink low.

"Neville wouldn't hear of it," Luna continued. "We knew they were coming, but they came faster than we expected. He threatened to Imperius me just so I wouldn't do it."

That turned her stomach a little, that Neville would even think something like that.

But...

She thought of the fate he had condemned his own grandmother to. Another woman in another cage.

Anger spiked.

Hermione gave Luna a bitter smile.

"Funny isn't it, how every man thinks his wants can override your own. Harry, Neville, Draco... they're all the same."

"That's not true," Luna said, frowning. "How could you say that?"

"The only one who hasn't disappointed me yet is Ron," Hermione said, more to herself than to Luna. "But he died too early. Who knows..he might have joined them, too, with enough time."

"Don't compare them like that," Luna said a little heatedly. "They're nothing like Draco."

"Harry lied to me to 'keep me safe' and led to my kidnapping," Hermione hissed, leaning in suddenly, her face livid. Luna reeled back in fear. "He went behind my back to ensure my safety and didn't even once ask me about it. Draco bound us together against my will. He raped and beat and impregnated me because *he* wanted it, and it didn't matter that I didn't. And you just told me Neville threatened to control you against your will so he could get his way. Tell me how that doesn't make them all the same sort of monster."

At a loss for words, Luna merely stared back, and Hermione knew that her words had hit her deeply.

"What else has he done, that I don't know of yet?" she added softly. "Does he hit you, too? Hold you down when you aren't in the mood? Or does he use words to hurt you?"

Luna flinched. Although they had never spoken of it outright in the very few chances they'd had to speak in the times they'd met, Hermione had accurately sensed that she and Neville were together. Luna's staunch defense of him was telling enough.

"Merlin, *no*," she gasped. "He'd never."

Hermione stared at her for a moment until she was satisfied.

“Good,” she finally said. “Then what has he done, that Draco holds it over my head? I don’t like surprises, and I’m tired of Draco doling them out like bitter medicines.”

Luna shook her head, her eyes pleading. “Could it just be that he’s lying to you?”

“I’ve considered that, actually,” Hermione replied with bite in her tone. “But he was right about George, and I don’t see what he gains from lying to me about Neville when I’ve already joined him and do his bidding.”

At the mention of George’s name, Luna’s face clouded over, and Hermione sensed that his switching of sides must have been a hard blow to the resistance. How had that news broken out? She had an urge to ask, but did it really matter? And Draco might be willing to give her privacy to talk to their captive, but she knew he wouldn’t let them have all day to talk.

At that last sentence, Luna approached the bars of her cell again and gripped two of them tightly. Her pale, wan face peered at Hermione, her eyes feverish with hope—and the remnants of whatever torture she had been put through at the hands of Draco’s men.

“I’m here,” she repeated. “I’ll help you. We’ll find a way out—improvise if we need to. Prepare your son. We can do it if we work quickly.”

Hermione approached her slowly, so to not frighten her again. Her heart almost ached with... impatience?

She reached Luna and raised her hand, stroked Luna’s face through the bars in a gesture she meant as affection though inside, she felt nothing. Had this happened months ago, before her Horcrux, she would have been a sobbing mess on the floor, clutching her friend like a lifeline. She would have taken her hand and tried a thousand and one ways to break her out of this prison. Her skin was unclean and cold—Hermione brushed that one tear away from Luna’s cheek.

“Don’t you see?” she whispered back. ‘You’re about to learn what it’s taken me years to learn. Once you’re in here, there’s no getting out. Not alive, anyhow.’ She cleared her throat. “You shouldn’t have come for me. I told you not to come.”

Luna gripped her hand.

“You didn’t listen,” Hermione continued. “And I’m going to have to kill you so Draco won’t have the satisfaction of making you suffer more than necessary. And I’ll drag another body behind me, and that’s exactly what he wants. We’re all playing into his cards no matter what we try.”

Luna’s hand went slack and fumbled its hold on her own.

She stared at Hermione as if she were a stranger.

That twinge of pain that rattled her insides was real. That comforted Hermione, to know she could still feel it.

“There’s no way out,” she heard herself say. “I’ve spent years looking. I’m tired, and I want this to end.”

Luna’s eyes were glassy with tears.

"I'm sorry if that's not what you wanted to hear," Hermione said. "But I warned you. You've wrapped yourself up like a present for Draco. Thank you for risking everything for me but it won't work, and you know it."

Luna's shoulders slumped. She leaned against the bars, her head cast down as her fate slowly became more concrete. Her long, pale blond hair was a tangled mess, half of it still stuck in a braid. A full ten seconds passed before she spoke again.

"We found a bit of your DNA at the Burrow, you know," she said, her voice hollow. "A bit of fingernail. We thought we could break in here, feed some Polyjuice to somebody and switch you out, hide you somewhere. I had some of it with me, but they took it. And of course, Malfoy knows of it now."

"A bold plan," Hermione sighed. "But Draco's got every property of his warded to hell and back. The only illusions allowed are the ones applied as you exit. That's how he's kept me hidden... I tried removing them at first, tried to ask for help from strangers. But he was always with me, and the illusions couldn't be removed until we came back home. After a while, I enjoyed the anonymity. When I can go on walks on my own and under a disguise, I feel almost normal."

"You can have that again," Luna insisted bleakly, though Hermione saw in her eyes that she knew her efforts had been futile. "I promise, Hermione. Work with me."

"I've done bad things already, and it will only get worse from here on out," Hermione said. "Draco will never stop until you and Neville are gone—chances are he still won't stop even when you are... I told you not to come. There's nothing left to fight for. He's made me like him."

"If you're talking about Danielle, she's dead, Hermione, and there's nothing else we can do for her—"

"I don't want to hear her name again. *She* gets to be dead. I dream the moment I killed her, and I want to be in her place."

Shaken, Luna cocked her head at her. "Hermione..."

Hermione reached into her pocket, withdrew something.

Luna looked at it warily.

"Soon you'll be dead, too, and that's just another name to the long list of people gone that I can't join."

"What are you talking about?"

"I joined him in more ways than one," Hermione said. "That part was consensual. What he did after wasn't. I only joined him to get my magic back. He saw right through it and tied me to him so now there really is no escape, even with my magic restored. Not ever."

She pointed her wand at herself. Pressed the tip right over her heart. No chance of missing.

"Wait," Luna was saying, her eyes urgent with understanding. "*Hermione, don't—*"

"Avada Kedavra."

She staggered slightly as the curse burst from her wand and seared through her.

It was cold. Like a vacuum, dragging at her insides like it wanted to take them right along, rip them from her body. It was like when a light switch is flicked incorrectly and gets stuck halfway, leaving a flickering light—she felt a stutter in her pulse, her breath catch in her lungs like a hiccup, but it never fully stopped or even paused, and as quickly as that flicker had come, it was gone.

Its green flare was so bright inside the dark dungeon that it blinded both her and Luna for some moments during and afterward. Luna had let out a shocked gasp and reached through the bars of her cell blindly.

“*Hermione!*” Her cry echoed around the dungeon.

But she was still standing, still aware. It took a second to remember to breathe as she internally took stock of her senses, made sure that she had not in fact actually killed herself.

Of course it worked, the sly voice said, sounding smug. *Your husband would not have gone to half-measure when he thought he lost you again. He made damn sure it couldn't happen. And now you know what it feels like to die.*

Luna stared at her in disbelief, her arm still outstretched and grasping through the bars of her cell.

She saw Hermione, perfectly calm and still breathing. Her brows tilted upwards. A glimmer of a tear tracked down her cheek.

Her dry lips twitched. *What-?* But no sound came out.

Hermione put her wand away.

“Has Neville told you about Horcruxes?”

Recognition flickered in Luna’s eyes, and she stared at Hermione in growing horror.

Draco met her at the top of the stairs. The walk to the only entrance/exit of the dungeon was a long one, and dark, at that. She had been in no mood to aid her way with magic, and so when she saw the dim outline of the bottom of the stairs, she paused there, and suddenly the earth opened from above. The rumbling helped rouse her from the trancelike state she’d found herself in during that solitary, dark walk, and the piercing sunlight and its heat woke her—she glanced up and saw Draco’s form, tall and broad, standing expectantly at the top. She had nearly made it all the way up the last of the stairs, but he reached down, took her hand, and helped her up the final ones. She ended up about an inch away from him.

He was radiant in the sun—like a man carved from ice or marble; his eyes clear and following every movement she made. His hair and robes were now and then ruffled gently by the wind, but otherwise he stood perfectly still.

He let go of her hand. His eyes were cold and expectant.

But not furious.

"You didn't kill her."

"Not yet."

He let out a slow, impatient sigh through his nostrils.

"Then you're telling me that green flash I saw was you trying to kill yourself, is that it?"

"I was trying to prove a point," Hermione said.

"And what would that be?" he asked softly, coming closer. His hand came up, traced a delicate line down her throat.

She refused to twitch.

"I can't be saved."

The corner of his lip lifted. "Clever. I'd have liked to see the look on her face."

He swooped down, picked her up into his arms, and they began the walk back to the manor.

"How did it feel?" he asked.

"Cold."

"It's lovely, isn't it?"

"Yes. Like falling asleep... until you're woken up."

When they entered the manor, he did not let her down until they had reached the library. He set her down onto the couch nearest to the fire. He sat with her, draping her legs over his lap so that she was forced to lie back and against the side rest. He stroked her legs slowly, relishing her warmth.

"Why didn't you kill her?"

"You're too hasty," she said, wanting to extract herself from his presence and leave the room. She'd thought he would have been angrier by her attempt. But the security of his Horcrux had him content. Confident. She would be a fool to turn his mood so quickly.

"We can use her to draw out Longbottom."

He looked at her, his eyes alight with surprise and desire.

"I thought about that," he confessed. "Two birds, one stone. But I like a chase—even if it means waiting a little longer."

"No," she said, her voice firm. "I'm tired of this. I'm tired of worrying. I want it to end. I want peace."

"We *have* peace," he said, gesturing around them. "Nobody can touch us."

Hermione shook her head.

"That isn't what I mean."

He took her chin in his hand. The strong sunlight coming into the room made his irises appear drained of their icy blue color. "Tell me what you mean. What do you want, my love?"

It was a feeling she couldn't quite put into words. Not yet.

She merely shook her head again, and he came in close to kiss her gently—but not before first hesitating to make sure she permitted his touch.

"You'll tell me when you're ready, then."

She nodded.

His thumb traced a soft line over her lower lip. His eyes were magnetic, trapping hers.

"That's one death for each of us now," he said, sounding amused. "How many more will there be over the years?"

"You'll have a hundred before the year is out," she said.

Draco grinned and kissed her again.

"Now you know you can never leave me. Not even death can take you from me. You'll always come back."

He nuzzled at her throat. To his surprise and delight, she turned her head to give him better access, and he took it greedily, his mouth leaving round little red marks wherever he wanted.

His hand was on her stomach, stroking it. Her hand grabbed his, pulled it to her breast. Elated, he massaged it gently, reaching beneath the neckline of her dress to play with her, skin to skin.

She paused him with a grip of his hand.

"Do you understand why I was cross with you?" she asked.

He almost resisted. But he folded. He was so close, what else could he do?

"I tried taking the control from you and I shouldn't have," he said. "Forgive me, my Lady."

She stroked his cheek, pleased.

"You're forgiven. Don't do it again."

"I wouldn't dream of it," he said, his voice thick with lust. Her nipple was hardening under his attentions. Hermione magicked her gown away and he bent down at once to suckle at her breast.

She moaned, clutching him close. His other hand played gently with her other breast.

"Firebird," he murmured, "my beautiful, frightening witch... I need you. Would you end my suffering?"

Hermione had half a mind to tell him to leave her alone. But the heat of him was too inviting, and she could feel his hardened cock press against her and his mouth tormented her nipple and her need flared again. Plus, he had behaved rather well recently...

Without saying a word she reached down between them, ridded him of his clothing with a gesture of her hand. She barely even realized what had happened until a moment later and paused.

“You’re using nonverbal wandless magic already,” he said, his voice reverent and low. “Have you been practicing?”

“No,” she looked down at her hand in surprise.

He beamed suddenly, straddled her, devoured her mouth.

“See how powerful you are without even trying?” he asked. “You surprise me still after all these years. My Lady, your power grows to match mine.”

No, she thought to herself. I’ll surpass you.

His hand had traveled down to cup her intimately, and then his fingers delved between her folds to circle her clitoris. Hermione moaned, sucked on his neck, pressing her hips into his touch.

He worked her there quickly, roughly, and she let him. When he pressed harder in just the right spot she threw her head back and he swallowed her cries of pleasure.

He was leaking cum already, his erection so painful it frayed at his concentration and patience. But he had disobeyed his wife and thus owed her more than an apology.

Her hand took his and guided his fingers inside her. Her eyes were squeezed shut, sweat dampened her temples and she let out a harsh pant when he began thrusting his fingers inside her slowly.

She gripped his shoulders. Her eyes flashed.

“More.”

He obeyed and gave it to her. His mouth latched back onto her nipple, sucking it hard.

She came quickly. He felt her quivering underneath him and almost came, too, but barely forced it back. He wanted to be buried deep inside her for that. As she writhed in pleasure on the bed, he stroked her hair away from her face with his free hand. The one inside her continued thrusting until her eyes began to roll back in her head, and then he pulled out and stroked her gently, grounding her.

“I love you,” he murmured as she came down. Over and over.

“I need you,” she pulled at his arms. “I need you now.”

He almost felt the air around him go still as the words processed. Lust and surprise spiked so sharply inside him it made him dizzy.

He watched her avidly, engraving the sight of her moaning those words willfully to the deepest recesses of his mind so that it might stay there forever.

When she’d come to, she stretched as best as she could, as he was still carefully supported atop her. Her face glowed from the pleasuring, and when she met his eye, he could see she

was not yet done. Good, he thought, for neither was he. Not by a long shot. He ravaged her mouth.

“Mine,” he moaned as they broke briefly for air. He let his head drop, their noses touching. She was still rosy and glowing from her orgasm, her eyes half-lidded. “Blessed, wicked witch... all mine.”

She gave him a dazzling smile, reached up to push some hair away from his face.

“And you, my Lord?” she asked. “Who do you belong to?”

“You,” he said automatically, without hesitation or resentment. The truth of it was in his eyes. It pleased her.

An unspoken agreement passed between them—he grabbed hold of her hips, and she reached down and began to play with herself as he finally took his cock and sat himself inside her without an inch to spare.

She grunted, but her arousal and her orgasm had prepared her, and Draco, already at his rope’s end, came inside her almost instantly, barely managing three thrusts before he burst.

He groaned loudly in pleasure, his teeth sinking into his own lip. He tasted blood.

“Yes,” he said, his voice hoarse. His balls were drawing up into themselves, pumping every last bit of come inside of his wife. The past few days had been an agony of needing release, and it all flooded out of him to fill her now. His climax wracked his body, tensing his muscles and sending his hips into a frenzy. His vision went spotty and dark for a moment. He gasped for breath. His hands dug into her hips. Her body gripped him so sweetly—her hands were clutching his back, her nails digging in.

“Fuck, Hermione!”

He was just catching his breath, his eyes focusing slowly. She gave him an arch smile, and took his chin in her hand, gave him an almost pitying look.

“Is that all, my Lord?”

His mouth set in a line.

She wiggled her hips, taunting him.

“Has your libido finally exhausted itself? I’m sure even Theodore would last longer.”

His eyes flashed. He was still hard. Draco cupped her throat, pulled out and shoved himself back in. If it hurt her, she managed to hide her pain well. His grip around her throat tightened almost painfully. The menace in their eyes matched each other. He gave another sharp thrust. Her lips curled to bare her teeth.

“Are you mad you came so quickly or that I said someone else’s name?”

Don’t get tarty now, because I’m not letting you off this goddamned couch until I’ve got my cum leaking from every one of your holes, wife, “he said through grit teeth.” And I don’t care if you said his name. You’ll be screaming mine before I’m through.”

He quickly cast a lust charm-not that he needed it much-and let it settle over him.

"You made me wait for this," he said, stroking himself, watching her as her own hand snaked down her body to play with herself. "Now it's your turn, sweetheart. I've got a good feeling about today-maybe we'll make another son."

He made to guide his cock into her-her talons pressed into his abdomen.

"I *will* cut your cock off and burn it before you force another child on me," she said, her voice sharp like a dagger. "I will decide when the right time is."

He seemed surprised at the implication that she was no longer as unwilling to have a second child as before. Then it clicked.

"You finally see it now, do you? How lonely our son is. Or did he have to tell you that himself?"

Hermione closed her eyes.

"If you weren't so protective, he wouldn't feel that way. He needs a normal childhood to socialize and flourish."

"I told you to send the letters, didn't I?" His hands reached up, massaged her breasts. Her talons receded slowly. "But a brother or a sister would be more beneficial for him. Just think of it, sweetheart-we'll fill this quiet manor with lively children. Lucio will never feel alone again. He'll take care of the others. They'll go to school together when they're old enough, and I'll have you all to myself again."

He mounted her, pressing forward to push her knees to her chest, his cock angled more deeply inside her. Hermione moaned.

"I'm not going to give you a litter," she said breathlessly as he began to pound. Her ass jiggled against him with every thrust. She gripped the sheets. "I'm not your broodmare."

Draco chuckled.

"Of course not, sweetling." He rolled his hips slowly. She groaned. "I don't actually want a house full of children. But breeding you is such a wonderful thing-it would be a shame to deprive the world of more Malfoys."

Draco stopped, withdrew from her, guided her onto her hands and knees on the edge of the bed. His large palm hugged her lower abdomen, folding her into him as his other hand guided himself back in. She was so wet, hissing softly as he stretched her over and over, his thrusts maddeningly slow. Her nipples ached as they rubbed against the fabric underneath her. One hand rubbed at her clit in quick, tight circles. Her inner thighs were damp with want. She thrust backwards into him. Draco groaned loudly and shivered.

"One Malfoy is enough," she panted. Draco squeezed her, bit down gently on her shoulder.

"Three," he corrected her, stroking her belly. "Three Malfoys are not enough. I grew up without siblings. Lucio will not. He will have a proper family. And we'll give it to him, won't we?"

Hermione laughed, even as she pushed back into him as he thrust. "Only if you continue to behave."

“You say that like I wasn’t deemed suitable for Head Boy,” he said, feigning offense, and chuckled. She was quivering under him, almost at her climax. She was clenching him involuntarily—he couldn’t resist and quickened his pace, his lust like a coil wound within him, ready to spring, ready to go again and again.

“I still think you didn’t deserve that position,” she said through grit teeth.

“You can’t undo the past, firebird. Regardless, I think the position I have now is far better,” he hissed into her ear, and she shattered with a choked cry.

They slept in the next morning. Draco woke up, stretched, rolled to his side to find Hermione already awake and supported on one elbow, watching him. The curtains had been drawn already so the room was bright and warm. She had untangled herself from the sheets, and still nude, her loose hair spread everywhere. He had half a mind to drag Martin here and have him paint that very scene at once.

“Morning, sweetheart.”

“Good morning, my Lord.” She came over to give him a quick, unprompted kiss. Her voice was hoarse from the night before. The marks from his ravishment were in bloom all over her body. She moved a little delicately as if she were still tender. He would have purred with satisfaction if he could.

“What time is it?” he asked.

She eyed him, daring to hope.

“Are you going somewhere?”

Will I have today to myself?

He shot her hopes down as he rose from the bed and went into the bathroom, started up the shower.

“We’re going to the shops today,” he said, and motioned for her to join him.

Their shower was quick. Draco’s mood was elevated, almost chipper as they washed up.

“Why are we going out?” Hermione asked. She had been lathering her hair but Draco stepped behind her and took over for her. The water was so warm and inviting she for once didn’t want the shower to end, and whenever she was forced to shower or bathe with Draco, she was always racing to get out. “I wanted to go for a walk.”

“I want to spoil you rotten, that’s the reason,” Draco said, smirking. Hands in her hair, he angled them both out of the shower’s spray, then tilted her head back, pressed a kiss to her soapy forehead. “As for your walk, you can do that with me where we’re going.”

Hermione snorted, gestured around them.

“I don’t need or want anything. You’ve provided enough.”

“This isn’t optional. It’s about time you’re seen in public again. The way you smiled last night—I want the world to see that.”

He rushed her out of the shower when they were done, and with a slow wave of his arm, they were dry instantly. Hermione went to her closet and pulled on the first thing she found.

If there was no getting out of this, she would have to be careful not to spoil his mood. The last thing she wanted was to go out and be around others, but it seemed there was no getting around it.

“We’ll see Lucio first, surely.”

“Of course.” He put on a wristwatch, checked the time. “Too late for breakfast but we could have an early lunch.”

He held out a clock for her to step into. Hermione bit back a sigh and went to him.

“I won’t give any interviews.”

She had been accosted in the past by reporters. Once, years ago, Draco had tried to make her submit to an interview and tell his version of their relationship. He’d been by her side the whole time in a silent threat for her not to deviate, and Hermione had been so stressed by the ordeal of telling blatant lies and having to pretend to be blissfully in love that she’d had a panic attack. Draco had Obliviated the journalist and rushed her back home.

Draco laughed and helped ease her into her cloak.

“You won’t have to. All I need is for them to get photos of us together. We’re going to be on the Prophet tomorrow, and you’ll be the talk of the town.”

“Neville *will* come for Luna. You don’t need to go the extra mile just to rub it in.”

Draco grinned. “Sweetheart, it’s one of the things I enjoy doing most. When he comes to us, I’m going to show him a hundred reasons how he never could have beat me.”

He stepped back, his eyes scanning her up and down, but not with the heat of lust. He frowned slightly and made a gesture with his hand.

Already knowing his motive, Hermione looked down at herself and saw that her original simple red dress had been switched out for a white one, close fitting, deep-necked and well-structured with a long skirt that flared out slightly at her knees where it ended. At her throat—the emerald choker.

She raised her brows.

“Are we visiting someone in particular?”

“No,” Draco said, with a wry twist of his mouth. “It’s a beautiful day and I want to go out with you and show you off. Oblige me, sweetheart.”

Despite his calm demeanor and his gentle words, the threat of an order lay like iron beneath it. Hermione relented and wove her arm through his offered one. He held tight to her hand, leaned in and kissed her temple.

“Thank you.”

They went to look for Lucio and Pansy.

A/N: she's gonna have him so whipped by the end of this fic y'all
also
"I told you not to come" = "I'm sorry"

20. Need

After their lunch and Lucio had gone to meet with his tutors, Draco had taken Hermione's hand and led her silently to the foyer. From there, he had Apparated them away from the Manor.

Knockturn Alley was lively in a way Hermione had never seen before—it was a rare crisp, bright day, and clearly everyone had come out to take advantage of it—voices rang out from every which way. Bells chimed, dogs barked, children laughed and ran about. Music played loudly somewhere—Hermione could only guess it was coming from the small crowd slightly ahead of them—she could make out the merry tune of a fiddle, and the audience there was clapping along to the rhythm. She had never seen the place so... merry, and it was unsettling.

She couldn't remember the last time Draco had brought her here. Knockturn Alley had always been a dim, dark, grizzled place. She had never seen so many people smiling genuinely here, much less seen this many children about. It almost felt like Diagon Alley. Her visits had been infrequent over the years, and despite the length of time in between each one, Knockturn Alley never seemed to change—she realized with a turn of her stomach that Draco's murder of Harry had probably been the cause. Dumbledore and Harry gone. A new Dark Lord to rule meant no more hiding. No more restrictions.

Her first excursion outside of the Manor without a disguise had been here, when it had still been normal (for Knockturn Alley, anyway), and Draco had first got the idea for these publicity stunts. The first one had been the worst. He had decided it was safe enough a time and that by then public opinion/interest in her vanishing had dried up. His power and influence had grown thanks to that final battle—who would be so bold and foolish enough to accost him now? He had all but dragged her to Diagon Alley and then to the Ministry to run some minor errands that he really could have done on his own. But he had dressed her up and threatened her with an Imperius or worse if she didn't play along or try to make a break for freedom. She remembered how countless eyes had lingered on her, recognizing, disbelieving, even joyous—only to turn to fear and suspicion when they saw Draco's arm around her, his ring on her finger. There had been rumors, she knew. Whispers, probably. And they had probably doubted or dismissed them. And she got to see the exact moment it all clicked in their minds as they had stared at her. She had felt so overwhelmed, just being there, being *out* of the manor, surrounded by so many people again. She had scanned the faces of those crowds to see if there was anybody she recognized—and then remembered with a sinking of her heart that most of them had been killed in that battle, and that the man gripping her tightly was responsible. There was no opportunity to run. Draco would have punished her, probably lashed out at the innocent folk around them. The media had hardly dared approach them, but snapped their photographs from afar and only asked their questions when Draco deigned acknowledge their presence.

Her heart had been in her throat the entire time. She had wanted to cry for help, to try escape after all—Draco had sensed this and never let her out of his sight, never loosed his hold of her. She had forced a neutral, slight smile on her face and didn't recoil when Draco

kissed her or held her in front of those cameras. He had practically gloated to the world then and there of his victory—and who was going to challenge him?

Whether anyone noticed her rigidity and barely-concealed agitation, they never mentioned. Unable to wrench free from Draco's grip, she had allowed herself to be paraded about, humiliated and furious as Draco flaunted her on his arm. When anybody spoke to her (in his presence, of course) they had asked superficial questions about their marriage. Draco hadn't prepped her on what to say but she had to play along—she had told them she had run away with him to marry and nobody inquired further, as if it were the norm to do at age 17 while still at Hogwarts, and with nobody else having a clue that they'd been in a relationship.

Perhaps Draco had them all in his control, too—maybe there was some sort of spell involved here. She wouldn't put it past him. It would be no effort on his part to bewitch so many people. How could they bow to him now when surely years ago they must have been searching for him in every darkened corner to arrest him under the charge of murdering Dumbledore? Or that he was the reason that Azkaban still lay in ruins?

The Devil hides under a cloak of popularity and influence.

Her eyes swept around the scene.

Surely even his wealth couldn't have bought him out of *that*.

How did you do it? She asked, unable to help her curiosity. *Have they forgotten what you've done?*

They remember it very clearly, he replied. *Our people stay on this side so of course they're happy to see us. Diagon Alley is a little different. They remember, and they're less happy, but if they're stupid enough to think they can take me on, or that they want to blow the whistle, they'll think again.*

She could smell meat pies cooking from the nearest pub. Memories of time spent in the Leaky Cauldron with Harry and Ron resurfaced suddenly like a wave—she caught herself leaning back slightly, as if trying to distance herself.

Draco noticed and squeezed her hand gently.

"Where would you like to go first?" he asked.

She was blinking, ridding herself of the memories.

"This was your idea," she said. "You lead the way."

He conceded, and they began to move forward. The area was so densely packed that nobody noticed them at first. Hermione adopted a quick pace, trying to keep herself from view but he would not allow it—he held on to her more tightly and kept his pace leisurely and proud, his head high, his eyes forward. She slowed reluctantly, more nervous than she thought she'd be.

Any time she met eyes with somebody, however brief, she almost expected them to shout at her.

Traitor. Whore. Monster.

It was the same wherever she went.

It was one thing to have had those accusations hurled at her when she'd had no choice but to play along with the deception, even though she had fought against him all that time.

Now that she had embraced it... well, things were different now, weren't they?

The memory of Danielle's accusatory glare cut across her mind's eye.

"They were right about you. Traitor."

Just another word to add to her long list of epithets. She could almost imagine her dead friends and classmates, all lined up before her. She could picture a wide range of disappointment across all their faces. The judgement. The fear and sorrow.

They failed you, the voice-not Draco's-whispered to her. *You owe them nothing now.*

Traitor. Whore. Monster.

Yes I am, she thought, meeting their eyes defiantly. And she held her head higher and walked on.

As they moved into the crowd, a hush fell among those nearest them as they made way for the Malfoys.

It was an annoyance that had gripped her every time they came here. At least in the villages nearby the Manor she had her anonymity—Draco's wards would disguise her to the outside world unless he was taking her there himself or decided she didn't need the protection. But under those enchantments, she was largely left alone to her pleasure. She roamed as she pleased, mingled with the locals as if everything were normal again. Nobody looked at her the way they were now.

Draco's thumb was stroking the back of her hand as if to reassure her. She felt overwhelmed suddenly by the stimulation all around her, and wished she'd stayed home.

That's it, he said encouragingly to her through their bond. *Take a deep breath. Walk like you own this place. Like you could tear it all down in a blink if the slightest thing displeases you.*

I will not be cruel for a whim, she replied.

Eyes lingered on hers curiously, and then flicked to Draco, and widened with recognition. The same pattern every time. She heard whispering as they kept walking, could feel the stares. Some pointed covertly. Others were more blatant. She raised her chin higher and stared back until they either looked away or smiled at her. The music faltered as they passed the merry fiddle crowd, and the player hit a wrong note, but recovered instantly after.

"My Lord," some would mumble, bowing their necks as they passed. Draco acknowledged them with the barest of nods. Others took off their hats in acknowledgement.

She heard it over and over as they walked and was so focused in watching Draco's response to it all that she belatedly noticed they were doing it for her, too.

"Good afternoon, my Lord, my Lady," the man closest to her said, taking off his cap and bowing his head as she walked past.

Hermione could only stare.

Why the shock? Draco's tone was teasing. *Did you think the title meant nothing? My parents held these titles before we did.*

She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of saying yes. She had thought the Lord and Lady farce was sustained only within the manor. That it had been an act of narcissistic grandioseness as Voldemort's had been. But to see it here—to see the fear and reverence in their eyes as they looked at Draco was unsettling. Deeply so. And to see it aimed at herself, too, was even worse.

You know what he's done. She wanted to tell them. *Don't bow. Don't look at him like that. What hold does he have over you? He doesn't look like Voldemort, but he's just as vile.*

It was a struggle not to recoil when they did it to her, too. In the Manor with Draco's followers, was one thing. Here with regular folk was somehow worse. She thought to Draco's boasting of his reputation, his philanthropy over the years.

Building a new magical school. Donating to various charities. What else? But they had to know it was a veneer for his true nature. How could they look at his robes, his cult, his history, and still greet him in the manner they were now?

My father and mother would have used these titles if it weren't for Voldemort, you know. So would have the other prominent Pureblood families. He didn't care to be a king, but he cared enough to put Lord in his name although it didn't belong to him. And because he was a Lord, nobody else could be. He forced everyone to stop using their titles so he would be above them all, and he got what he wanted. I wasn't sorry to see him perish.

And will you do the same? She asked. *I've never heard you address any of your devoted by Lord, or such.*

She glanced at him and caught the corner of his lip lift into a smirk.

I haven't forbidden it but they're too afraid to ask. Let it be as it may.

And if they ask?

If they want the right to use their title again, they'll have to earn it.

His thumb was stroking her ring finger, where his cursed gift had once lived.

A young woman a few steps up ahead was staring at them in near awe.

Let's put on a show for them, Draco suggested.

Out loud, he said. "We're going into that shop on the left. I'm going to buy you some lovely new things for you to wear only for me, and then we'll go into Flourish and Blott's and you're going to pick out anything you want to add to our library, and then we'll go into that toy store farther down and find something to bring back to Lucio. How does that sound?"

Well, she was never one to frown at the prospect of new books.

Hermione looked at him, made herself smile. "It sounds lovely, my Lord."

They had reached the first shop he had mentioned, and he made to move the door open for her but a clerk from within rushed outside and held it for them both. Draco thanked the man with a galleon as they went inside.

See how quickly word spreads? He asked. *They don't do this for everyone. The press will be here soon enough, and they'll be following our every move.*

Why are we here? Hermione asked, but before he could respond, the owner of the shop had come out to greet them enthusiastically, bowing. She was a very tall, plump brunette woman with a nervous but warm smile that dimpled her cheeks. Hermione found herself instantly reminded of Lavender Brown, and pushed the thought away with some difficulty.

"Welcome, my Lord and Lady," she said. "To what do I owe the special honor of having you *both* in my shop today?"

"A special occasion," Draco said, his arm snaking around Hermione's waist. He traced a finger along the ties of her cloak and it disappeared. "Your work for us has been extremely appreciated all these years. I want to custom order another dress for my wife, as well as some underthings."

"Of course, my Lord," the woman said, smiling. "You honor me with your continued patronage. It's truly an honor."

So this was from whom Draco had fattened up her closet since the first week of their union. It was a strange feeling.

"I believe we've never met, my Lady," the woman said, approaching Hermione. "I am Wendy, and I apprenticed for years with Madame Malkin before opening my own boutique. My Lord has been my most faithful customer, and it is truly a pleasure to meet you at last."

What am I supposed to say? Hermione thought to herself shrewdly. *That he picks what he wants me to wear? That I wouldn't have picked half of it for myself? That he destroys most of it as quickly as I first wear it?*

"It's good to put a face to the name," Hermione said, smiling, although knowing that Draco had never once spoken of this woman. "We've been impressed time and time again by your skill. My husband chose wisely."

It had the desired effect, however. Wendy beamed. She couldn't have been much older than herself or Draco.

"Not to speak ill of the dead," Draco was saying, "but Malkin's oeuvre was always behind the times. Her sons run her shop now, don't they?"

"Yes, my Lord," Wendy said. "All but one of them, and to be honest their work looks almost identical to hers. Now, shall we?"

They walked to the back of the store, where a fitting area spread out behind an elegant curtain. The shop was large and boasted racks upon racks of one of a kind makes, all without prices, but Hermione guessed that by Draco's mere deigning to shop here, the sort of person who shopped here had enough funds to not care what numbers lay on a tag. She took it all in, frowning, almost dizzy.

An attendant had approached them, with glasses of champagne to offer. Draco took one. Hermione shook her head. He pressed it into her hand anyway.

I want you to finish it.

Irritation flaring, she sniffed it as discreetly as she could and took a sip. Draco had taken a long drink of his, his hand around her waist squeezing her in encouragement. Hermione held her breath and took a longer drink.

The shop was much bigger inside than it looked from outside. She could see no other workers within. Had they known she and Draco were coming, or was it normally this quiet?

There was a shortish platform for her to step on to get her measurements taken. Wendy offered to help her up—already the drink had hit her—Hermione fought a slight wobble in her step as she followed the few steps up to the top. The whole place was beautifully lit and smelled of fresh flowers. Hermione glanced nervously at the windows, half-afraid that strangers who had seen them enter might be looking in.

They can't see inside, Draco assured her, having followed her line of vision. *The windows are charmed so they can't see through.*

That *did* relieve her a little. Hermione felt herself relax.

What is this all about? She asked.

Can't I just order you a beautiful dress for no reason? He responded teasingly. *You know I'm selfish. I want to dress you up in lovely things just for the fun of unwrapping you later.*

I have enough dresses at home. I don't need another.

Sweetheart, with a body like that, you deserve to be decorated.

He met her eye and winked, then sat on a lush chair nearby. Huge gilded mirrors stood along the wall, carefully angled so that when Wendy motioned for her to stand before them, she could see herself quite thoroughly. Several long strands of measuring tape floated in the air beside her, accompanied by a notepad and quill.

"May I?" Wendy's hands were on her shoulders, silently asking if she could remove her capelet. Hermione nodded and it slid off, floated away and hung itself on a peg on the wall.

"What did you have in mind, my Lord? Is this for a special occasion?"

"Yes, I suppose it is," Draco said. His eyes were on Hermione's, heavy and intense. "You have the notes I sent you?"

"Ah, yes—" Wendy waved her wand and a note lying on a little side table to the left of the fitting area flew into her palm. She read it over quickly. "Yes, I can make this without a doubt, my Lord. When will you be needing it?"

By now the measuring tapes had each encircled parts of Hermione's form, gently nudging her arms away from her body to take her waist and hip measurements. Others were at her wrists and elbows. One wound around her shoulders. The quill scribbled gently onto the notepad.

"As soon as possible."

When her measurements had been taken, Hermione left the platform gratefully. New flutes of champagne had been left on the table between their chairs. Draco held out hers, his eyes expectant. She took it stiffly and drained half in one go. It was strong, and she fought the wobble in her step as she sat back down. She hadn't eaten much that day, and it was really starting to affect her.

Wendy brought out a stack of fabric example catalogues. They were massive and heavy, and Hermione opened one to find scraps of lace and mesh and silks and all sorts of things in every color neatly laid out and labelled on each page.

"I want something in green," Draco said. "With lots of lace. Exposed back. A ribbon so I can unwrap her like a gift. I want the bottoms without a crotch."

Hermione fought her blush hard, but felt it spread over her face.

Wendy was nodding, and her ReadiQuill hovering in the air beside her was quickly jotting Draco's orders down.

Draco saw Hermione's reaction and grinned. "That was my only request, sweetheart. The rest are up to you." He gestured to the binders.

Hermione rifled through the one she was holding, speechless at the sheer amount of choices.

"I've never had an eye for fashion," she heard herself say. "I usually trust Draco's judgement."

Not like I had a choice.

"What color do you like best, my Lady?" Wendy asked.

Hermione couldn't remember. It had been so long since she'd been allowed to really mull over something so inconsequential. It had been pink years ago...

"Blue," she said suddenly.

"You do look stunning in blue," Draco agreed. "You don't wear it often enough."

Wendy was already pulling samples from the book and matching them together.

"What do you think of this, my Lady?"

"It's lovely," Hermione said. She was starting to feel dazed again. She reached for her drink and drained the rest.

"In what sort of style would you like them?"

Style? What did it matter? Draco would tear them in an instant, anyway. He was always so impatient that he only admired her lingerie for a brief moment before getting to what he really wanted. And what was wrong with the numerous sets she already had?

"Surprise me," she made herself say, and added a smile on top to not betray her irritation. "I'm sure the results will be exceptional."

Wendy beamed. "You flatter me, my Lady."

They left not long after. Draco held the door for her as they exited the shop, the merry little bell on the door chiming in relief behind them. Passersby stared again as they walked past. Cameras flashed. People whispered.

When they were a safe distance away, Hermione sighed.

"I *don't* need new clothes, Draco."

"Maybe not," Draco agreed, smiling.

"If you really wanted to pamper me, you might just have spent the day away from the manor."

He snorted. "What, and miss your loving remarks?"

"You'll tear them all up, anyway," she sniffed.

"Oh, yes," his tone was wicked. "With my teeth. But you need to be seen and interacted with aside from just being silent by my side the few times you come out with me. To make them loyal to you they need to see you and hear you, don't you think? You did very well, sweetheart. Very well."

He held out his arm for her to take, and when she did, led her farther down the street. They entered the bookstore next, and an hour later found themselves deep within it, an attendant following them with a large basket already laden with books of their choosing hovering beside him.

Hermione, having grown overly familiar and bored of the selection in Draco's library, had jumped on his proposal to replenish their stock. He had watched as she had set about going from aisle to aisle, section to section, that analytical gleam in her eye that he loved so well. She hadn't spoken much for the first half hour of their mission and Draco had largely let her be, preferring to simply watch. She was rather like a hummingbird as she worked, flitting here and there to pick books that intrigued her. As always, her selection was impeccable, and he decided they would make a day of it to add this new stock to the library together. Usually, he might have Pansy do it, but felt this was something Hermione would want to do herself.

She had her back to him now and was reaching for a book—she knew full well she could have asked the attendant to help her or used magic, but had insisted on doing it herself. He had been irritated at first but let her have her way to prevent the formation of a row in front of the crowd at the window. Plus, she was giving him an excellent view of her beautiful arse as she reached up to the higher shelves.

Were there not so many factors here to consider, he would sneak up on her and bend her over the nearest counter, hoist that skirt up, and fuck her senseless. He would have her bouncing on his cock in one of those armchairs by the fire. He would spread her legs wide open and feast—on the floor, atop a pile of books, he didn't care.

Blood kept rushing south. Draco bit his tongue sharply and set about collecting some books for Lucio.

She was coming towards him and the silent attendant now, another stack of books in her arms. Draco couldn't help the pride he felt in his expression as he watched her approach. He could feel eyes on them from the windows, where a small crowd had gathered to watch them

inside the shop. As he had predicted, the *Prophet's* photographers had arrived promptly and tailed them from Wendy's shop to here, and were waiting outside Flourish and Blott's with their cameras primed and ready. Draco didn't mind. He would give them the show they wanted. But it all had to seem natural.

The attendant took the stack from Hermione and packed them neatly into the box. This was their sixth one, and the basket wasn't so much a box rather than it was a crate. When it was full, he levitated it with his wand and left, taking it to the front counter.

Draco took Hermione by the arm before she went on to the next aisle and drew her back to him, deep within a tangle of bookcases that were laid out like a maze. Here, nobody could see them, and he planned to take advantage of that.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" he asked.

"Will you not pick books of your own?" she asked.

"I trust your taste," he said, kissing her, his hands wandering, pressing her against the bookcase behind her. She twisted, looking around nervously.

"I could take you right now against this bookshelf," he murmured into her ear, his hands cupping her ass. "You've got me all worked up, sweetling."

She looked perplexed. "I haven't done anything."

"So you say," Draco said, puffing out laughter. "The sight of you picking out books always did something to me. I watched you in the library a few times that last year, you know. You never knew, but I thought sometimes you might have sensed me there. Always barely restraining myself from pulling you into the stacks and claiming you then and there. That far back, I could have done it easily and made sure nobody could find us."

He pressed more firmly into the bookcase, his hands on her hips.

Her eyes were on his, challenging him. His hands were cupping her breasts, kneading them gently through her dress. He could feel her hardened nipples through the fabric, and longed to tear the whole thing off and take them into his mouth.

"Was there ever a time where you *weren't* stalking me?" she asked in a low voice, taking in a quiet breath as he discreetly pulled up her skirt to cup her intimately, relishing the heat between her legs.

"Yes, but it doesn't make for as interesting a story," he said, one finger slowly tracing her cleft through her underwear.

Hermione glanced sharply to the right, too aware of their attendant who might return at any moment. Her hands joined together at the nape of his neck.

"You did enough damage in that library."

He slipped his finger past the fabric, pushed between her folds. She pushed one leg out farther to give him better access. She was already wet, and he was grinning, using his fingers to paint along her inner thighs with her own arousal.

"Not as much as I wanted."

She tilted her chin up defensively. He could feel her conflict, but he took her lips as an offering and plundered them, yanking at the delicate fabric of her knickers until they snapped and broke off. He cast them to the side.

Don't start something you can't finish, sweetheart, he said to her.

The kiss was much gentler than he wanted. At the same time he was rubbing her roughly, sparking pleasure that trailed like fire up and down her nerves. Her toes curled. Hermione bit back a gasp, squirming.

Her hand reached down and grabbed his, squeezed.

"What about him?" she asked, breaking away from the kiss. The attendant had introduced himself after they had entered the store but she couldn't remember his name now, not when Draco's hand on her clit was wrenching every coherent thought from her mind.

"So what if he sees?" Draco asked. He pressed more firmly on one side of her clitoris as he stroked it and she buckled, stifling a moan.

She was gloriously wet. It was sliding down her thighs, dampening her skirt. He had half a mind to press her to the floor and lick her clean. Draco picked her up and sat her on the middle ledge of the bookcase, pushing her skirt up even farther, and resuming his attentions to between her legs.

"Nobody can see us," he assured her. "And if they do, it's not the end of the world, sweetling. They'll only see a man pleasuring his wife, as is his duty."

His fingers pushed inside her at last. She barely managed to quiet her cry of pleasure. He added a third and began to thrust, relishing the feel of her body clamping around him. Hermione clutched his shoulder for leverage, moaning softly.

"Yes," she said in a soft gasp. "Yes, please, my Lord. Don't stop."

Each word was like fuel. Draco licked his lips, watching her expressions as he pleased her.

"So wet already for your Lord, aren't you?" he said in a low guttural voice. "My sweet little slut. Did you feel me watching you then? If I had come out of the shadows and bent you over the table, thrown your homework aside, and fucked you after all, would you have been as wet then as you are now?"

"No," she hissed, aghast. He slowed his thrusts to a crawl.

"But look at you now," he said, his eyes heavy-lidded and intense, his free hand grasping her throat. "You know you want it. Beg me for it, sweetheart."

It was lucky that this shop had been cleared out before their arrival. Each aisle was narrow and the whole store felt like a labyrinth at times—you might turn one corner trying to find the geography section and then find yourself in the arts instead. Anyone might have walked in on them and got the shock of their life while merely looking for a book.

"All those times I watched you in the library at school," he said, his voice guttural and low, "this is what I wanted to do. I almost wish it hadn't been destroyed. I'd take you there now, bend you over that table of yours, and fill you all day long."

His fingertips traced the slowest circles over her clit. She was biting her lip, a delicious flush spreading across her face. Her hips twitched involuntarily into his touch, demanding more pressure. More speed.

Draco muttered a spell, watched as the top of her dress and subsequently, her bra undid themselves and came sliding down her form to meet around her middle. He bent forward, one hand still on her throat, its twin still tormenting her clit, and leaned down to bite gently at her nipple.

“Ah—” she jerked.

“Say it,” he ordered. Her pulse was quick and beating hard against his hand. Another bite, then a slow lick circling around her areola. He buried his face between her breasts, his hot breath permeating her skin. She burned for attention between her legs.

“Please fuck me, Draco,” she gasped. “I need you.”

Draco withdrew his hands from his wife, pulled open his robe, magically undid his belt, then undid his trousers. He gripped her thighs, pushed them wider apart, his hands shaking, and kissed her hungrily, his tongue sliding in and out of her mouth. The position wasn’t the most comfortable, but Hermione didn’t care. She had been through worse. Her fingers were sticky and busy between her legs as she waited for him. Her toes began to curl.

There was the sound of footsteps growing nearer. She froze.

“Bernard, bring us some wine,” Draco called suddenly, his tone too commanding to ignore.

Water would have been a much more reasonable request. Hermione doubted they had any wine on the premises... but it would give them more time unbothered.

The footsteps stopped. Draco’s hand was on his cock, guiding himself inside. His head pushed in slowly, and the rest followed, stretching her. Hermione inhaled deeply to keep back a loud gasp. Their eyes were locked together.

The clerk’s confusion was almost palpable in the air. So was his ire, but Hermione couldn’t blame him for that.

“...Do you have a preference, my Lord?”

Without warning Draco pushed in hard all the way, his hand over Hermione’s mouth to stifle her grunt. He went still, cupping her face in his hands, their eyes never breaking away from each other. He kissed her deeply. He throbbed inside her. Her hands grasped at his back.

“Only the darkest wines satisfy me,” he said after breaking the kiss. “I’m not picky, though. Surprise me.”

Hermione could almost picture the clerk rolling his eyes. What an unhelpful answer. But her thoughts were broken as Draco pulled back, surged back in sharply. A thrill of heat speared her. His hand was hot over her mouth—he shifted it, pushed two fingers past her lips. She began to suck him automatically, and he gave her a loving grin.

“Right away, my Lord.”

“Wait,” Draco commanded. “Do you have a first-print of Walton’s *Six Months Apart*?” he asked. He gave another hard thrust. Hermione gave a half-pained whimper. Her tongue slid over his fingers. She felt his cock twitch inside her. His eyes were heavy with lust.

“I’m not sure, my Lord. I’ll have to check.”

“Take your time,” Draco said and the Bernard the attendant’s footsteps faded away.

He withdrew his hand from her mouth. Grabbing hold of her thighs from underneath, Draco began to rock his hips back and forth, sinking deep inside her with every thrust.

“Fuck,” he whispered. He hunched over to suck at her breast. “You feel amazing, firebird.”

Hermione moaned, shivering. Her legs came up to wrap around his waist.

“Does that book even exist?” she panted.

“I read it as a boy once,” he said, pulling back from her chest. “I don’t remember it much. It just came to mind. It’s a very old book; it’ll take him some time to find whether they’ve got a copy or not.”

He continued thrusting, driving her into the books behind her. Hermione gripped his back, her legs wrapped around him, her lips pressed together to keep her cries within. He hissed with pleasure, leaned in to kiss her deeply, his tongue pressing down on hers. His thrusts increased in speed. The bookcase they supported themselves against began to wobble.

“This may not be the Hogwarts library,” he panted, “but I could still buy it and claim you over every inch of this space. I’ll have your little nook remade in our own home—not just your window but that little desk, too, and I’ll take you right there as I should have done when I had that first chance.”

“I’ll enjoy ripping your balls off, and stuffing them down your throat,” she replied, her eyes blazing.

He grinned, his teeth gleaming. Her toes were curling; beads of sweat dotted her body.

“That’s my girl.”

He curled in around her, as much as his thrusting would allow. Her hand had gone to her clit, increased its speed so that she sucked in a breath and her hips jerked. His mouth latched onto her throat, his hot breath raising a flush on her skin. She clenched around him and he groaned, his thrusts turning more erratic and shallow as he neared his release.

Hermione stroked the back of his neck, her eyes closing, already in the midst of her own orgasm. She gripped him in strong spasms, making his head fall back, a tortured moan crawling from his lips. The slickness around their joining increased. His cock drove into her relentlessly, even as her body fought to retain him, milk him. He allowed a bit of space between their bodies, his hand brushed hers aside to stroke her, drawing her climax longer and longer until she began to shake, pinned between him and the bookcase. She gave a sweet whine to indicate she could take no more.

“Almost,” he was murmuring into her throat, his voice low and rasping. “Almost, sweetheart. Wait for me, I’m nearly there.”

Hermione could only whine again in protest, her back arching. She wriggled under him, trying to get away from his demanding touch but his fingers wouldn't stop torturing her and his hips continued to pump, his mouth on her skin and the feel of him crushing himself against her was beyond escaping. Her limbs felt too slack, her thoughts too addled by her first orgasm and Draco doing his damndest to turn it into a second.

"Please!" she gasped.

He achieved it mere seconds later-her expression scrunched up, tightening in both pain and pleasure. He came with a ragged moan, bursting suddenly inside her. He stroked her hair from her damp face. His eyes were magnetic. He buried himself within her, as deep as he could go, plugging her up so no come would escape. Pleasure wracked him so tightly he stood tensely over her, shuddering, pulsing and throbbing inside her.

"My beautiful little queen," he was whispering into her ear. "Take it all."

She was going limp, her eyes dazed but starry as she looked up at him.

Her thighs trembled around him, her nerves flared. He pressed his palm to her womb, cast the contraceptive charm.

She smiled-a genuine one-it caught him off guard.

"Thank you, my Lord."

When Bernard returned, he found the Lord and Lady Malfoy just as they had been before, and nothing amiss. If he noticed the musty smell that most certainly was not the result of the thousands of old books within the store, he said nothing. He had only the wine and the unfortunate news that the book Draco had asked for was not available, that they would have to order a copy from someplace else. Draco made the order, and he and Hermione left shortly after.

The bookshop was dim on in the inside to protect the antique books-Hermione found herself wincing slightly as the strong sunlight assaulted her eyes once they had stepped outside the shop, but they adjusted quickly, to her relief.

Draco had hold of her arm.

"Was that enough books, do you think?" he asked.

She laughed in spite of herself. "No such thing."

"That's right," he agreed. "We'll be back here within a month to pick out some more, and I'll have you against the window next time, let the photographers get the photos they really want."

She pinched his arm. "Don't you dare."

Grinning, Draco took her and dipped her, one hand supporting the back of her head, and kissed her in a most indecorous manner, to the delight of the press waiting right outside. Hermione had barely noticed them-she was mostly aware of Draco's all-consuming kiss, his proximity muffling her breaths. He had not bothered to mend her knickers and so she was bare underneath her dress-even now, she could feel his sperm still leaking in thick ropes from her.

Dimly, through the kiss, Draco could hear the flashbulbs of the cameras popping, the clicks of photos being taken. A few saucy whistles. He repressed his grin and let his hand travel down, squeezed her arse. Hermione let out a startled gasp, breaking the kiss. She swatted his hand away and straightened, a spark in her eye as she looked at him—flushed and her lips still glistening from the kiss.

He held out his arm to her again. He would have liked to keep the kiss going but she had broken it at the right time. Blood was rushing south and he might just have given the photographers a much more scandalous view.

She took his arm again. She looked almost conflicted for a moment, but it was so brief it passed like a flash over her face—her eyes darted to the side, caught the press still waiting like sharks nearby, their cameras pointing straight at she and Draco. He saw the realization hit her that they must have seen what had just happened—her flush deepened.

They don't matter, he said. His hand fell from her face. *We're putting on a little show for them, that's all.*

She nodded.

Can we go?

He began to lead her away.

"Lord Malfoy, may we speak with you?"

"Lord Malfoy—"

"Would you honor us with an interview?"

"No," Draco said, shaking his head as they passed. "I am here with my wife to celebrate our anniversary, and do not want to be disturbed. Good day."

He led her on.

Hermione was frowning. She was probably tired. He wasn't surprised. She'd been going back and forth for over an hour selecting books, her arms raised to trace the titles embossed onto the countless spines she had inspected. That, and the quick but intense fuck they'd had in the bookshop had likely aided in wearing her out. She was pliant in his arms as they walked slowly. Most of the crowds had gone by now, and he was glad—he suspected she would be in no mood to continue her performance had they all remained.

They walked slowly. The sun was directly overhead.

In his peripheral, he caught notice of a reporter hurrying to match his pace, a notepad and quill floating just beside him, a strapped camera jostling against his chest. He felt Hermione go tense.

"My Lord, a word for the Prophet?"

"Leave."

The reporter stumbled and stopped, staring as Draco and Hermione walked past.

"Are you hungry?" he asked, turning back to Hermione.

“No,” she said.

“Are you sure?”

She nodded. She looked almost sleepy—she was leaning more heavily into him, her arm tucked into his. Draco felt a thrill of delight run through him.

People made way for them as they passed. Draco could hear owls hooting from the Owl Emporium ahead. A man in a wheelchair nearby was loudly telling a joke to a group of friends. The punchline was so devastating that he wheezed for breath before he could get it out.

“It’s our anniversary,” Hermione said suddenly.

Draco smiled, pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“I wondered if you would ever remember.”

She was watching patrons exit the store beside her, uninterested.

“I purposefully don’t remember it,” she said. “What’s there to celebrate about this?”

“New power,” he replied. “Second chances.”

“For you, or for me?” she asked with a sniff. “Divorce does it better, anyhow.”

He laughed. “For normal folk, perhaps. Not for you and I. Still, 8 years is nothing to sneeze at.”

She said nothing for a moment. He couldn’t tell what she might be thinking. His hand encircled her wrist absently.

“We’ve got a lifetime ahead of us,” he breathed. “And many more.”

And when she barely managed to conceal the expression of discomfort on her face, he sent into her mind:

Burn the past. Forge your future in that fire.

She blinked and raised her hand to press on his chest.

“Thank you for today.”

Draco smiled. Sure, her tone was a little wooden, and he could see the insincerity in her eyes, but he didn’t mind that at all. She was a quick learner in most things except for this union. He didn’t care if it took her eight more years to truly drop her walls, along with the remnants of her bitterness. So long as she played her part and remembered her place, he would be content. Today was a good start. She had behaved well—really well—and that demanded a reward, didn’t it?

They had reached the end of the line of shops and boutiques, and were now faced with either continuing down towards the residential area or turning back and making another loop. A narrow alleyway to their immediate left spewed steam from a large vent, partially obscuring them.

“Shall we go home?” Draco asked. “Or was there someplace else you wanted to go?”

He had noticed the way she had glanced back towards the direction they'd come from, as if she'd remembered something.

"I want to get my hair cut," Hermione said.

Draco frowned. Her hair had always been long and though he had the elf trim it for her now and then at home, it had hung down to the small of her back for years, and he preferred it that way. He loved her thick masses of curls and wanted no alterations.

"What for?" he asked, reaching up to hold a thick coil of her hair in his hand. "It's beautiful the way it is. I prefer it this way."

"I wasn't asking you," she said, narrowing her eyes. "I'm *informing* you that I'm going to cut my hair, and I will."

Draco grabbed her by the arm as she tried to walk away.

"How much are you taking off?"

"It's my hair, so as much as I want," she said. There was a glint of mischief and rebellion in her eye suddenly. "And if I come home with all of it shaved off, you'll bite your tongue and deal with it."

His eyes narrowed. She tried to pull away but his grip on her arm tightened painfully.

"If you even dare attempt something so stupid, I'll have it grown back by morning. Don't play childish games, Hermione."

"It's *my* hair, Draco," she said. "After everything else you've done to my body, you're going to control my hair, too? Do you realize how ridiculous you are sometimes?"

"I just want to make sure you aren't going to go to extremes, sweetheart."

"That shouldn't matter. Do what you like with your hair and I won't say a thing, so you have no right to tell me what I can and can't with mine."

He pulled her into the alley roughly, pinning her against the wall, almost snarling with anger. Hermione stared back insolently, their noses barely touching.

"You wanted to give them a spectacle?" she breathed. "Imagine the headlines when the reporters catch up to us and get their photos. The darling Lord Malfoy roughing up his wife in public, refusing to let her cut her hair. There's your damn front-page cover. You're this upset over my *hair*?"

His eyes flashed. She thought he might hit her and braced herself.

He weighed her words for a moment, then caught himself and let out a slow breath that spanned across her face.

"If they see us, I'll take their cameras and Obliviate them, and when they come to, they'll only find us snogging in an alley before we head home," he said tersely. "Don't underestimate me, sweetheart."

"It's only a damned haircut," she said through clenched teeth. "It's not that unreasonable, Draco. I'm not asking for you to free me."

His eyes bored into hers, as if trying to gauge whether this was some sort of plot to make a run for it. She stared back evenly.

At last, he craned his neck, leaning forward so he could press a gentle but firm bite into her shoulder, matching the scar he had left there long ago.

She could still hear music playing distantly but could see nobody through the end of the alleyway. Strangely, it was now concealed by decorative topiaries. Hermione couldn't remember if those had been there previously or if Draco had conjured them to hide them from public view. She had caught a glimpse of the hair salon just a few doors down going the other way, its jaunty yellow sign like a beacon of safety.

He finally released her, stepped back to assess her. He adjusted her skirt, took hold of her hand and led her out of the alleyway casually, like they had just slipped in for a snog.

He led her directly to the salon. His shoulders were in a tight line but Hermione didn't care if he was still annoyed. He might take it out on her later, but retribution was always a given in some form or another where Draco and his wants were involved. She had dealt with it countless times before and would deal with it countless more. If she didn't fight for these tiny victories, he would never even think of giving her back her rights—no matter how small or inconsequential they might seem. She almost felt giddy with the prospect of what she might ask for—no, *demand* next.

Perhaps a chastity belt for him.

She kept that thought very carefully to herself, but the urge to laugh was so big she had to bite her tongue and look away before Draco could catch it.

By now they had reached the salon. Draco was staring at its front windows intently, made a gesture with his hand. She tensed, half-expecting him to have cast a spell to restrain her. Nothing happened, to her relief; she turned, frowning at the window. Had he seen somebody he knew? But he spoke again, pulling her attention back to himself.

"You can get it trimmed if your heart is set on it, but no more than three inches off, and I'll send word to make sure my order is followed. If I'm disobeyed, there will be punishment. And when we get home, I'm going to wrap that hair of yours in my fist and pound you until you're leaking my cum for the rest of the night."

"I'd sooner burn your hand off."

He smiled as if to say *you know you won't*, took her hand and kissed it.

"Send word when you're finished," he said. "Then we'll go home."

He turned and left. Hermione let out a relieved sigh, her mood lifting another notch higher.

The shop had been reasonably occupied when they had come to it, but as Hermione turned around she saw customers being ushered out by employees, who looked very confused and cross indeed at this sudden shift. Some of them tried to argue but the hairdressers only shook their heads, glancing nervously at Hermione. She understood with a start what Draco's gesture had meant. The angry customers, upon noticing her, cast her a displeased look but still bowed and then stalked away.

She took a half step, instinct calling her to rush over and explain, insist they didn't have to empty their shop just for her. At least with the library and the dressmaker, Draco had sent word in advance of their intent to visit, and a request for the shop to be empty. The haircut had been an impulse decision—they'd had no chance to prepare. She might have blushed profusely once and felt guilt over the inconvenience and embarrassment at her own folly, but now merely stood and watched until the last customer had left.

The hairdressers lined up at the door, smiling, and Hermione stepped forth.

Draco met her outside the salon. Hermione held her head high as she approached him, her head feeling oddly light—it had been years since she had cut her hair, and she had grown used to the bulk of curls that hung down her back.

Draco's gaze was soft as he reached for her. He ran his hand through the ends of her hair, admiring the patterns of her curls and waves.

"You look lovely."

"Thank you, my Lord."

"Are you satisfied, firebird?" he asked, his lips curling into a smile. "I almost expected you to come out with your head shaved."

"And risk one bit of petty revenge for the lives of everybody in that salon?" she asked. "I'm not a fool, Draco."

He took her arm, tucked it into his, and they began to walk until they reached an opening just off the street, next to an apothecary.

When they got home, the books they had purchased had already been mostly delivered. Draco set the House Elf to adding them to the library after dinner. Hermione had taken a good pile of those she and Draco had chosen for Lucio and presented them to him. He had excitedly looked through them and taken five minutes to decide which to read first, and Draco had elected to put him to bed and read him a story.

Hermione allowed Pansy to escort her to the bedroom.

"You cut your hair!" Pansy said, looking surprised. "How did that happen?"

"I stood my ground," Hermione said, smiling. She shook her head, relishing how light her head felt now. "It's been yearssince it's been this short."

"How do you feel?"

"Tired, but okay." Hermione began to undo her hair. "It would have been much nicer without the press there. But... I had fun."

"I'm glad to hear it," Pansy said. "I know how stressful it can be, but I think it's best to get back out there as often as you can."

Hermione was nodding. "I know. I just feel like everything is so different every time I go out. It makes me apprehensive."

"I'll go with you if my Lord allows," Pansy offered.

Hermione took her hand and squeezed it. "I'd love that."

Hermione began to undress. Pansy hurried to help her with the fastenings.

"Dinner is nearly ready. We were waiting for you and my Lord to return."

"I want to wash up, first," Hermione said. "They can go ahead and eat if they're hungry."

"I'll run it for you."

Hermione finished undressing, put her clothes into a neat pile on the edge of the bed. She was still red and sore in places from Draco's ravishment in the library.

The sound of running water started in the bathroom, and soon enough steam began to emit from the open door.

Pansy walked out, wiping her hands dry on her skirt. She was well used to nudity in the manor by now, and did not balk at Hermione's state of undress.

"Will you want anything else?" she asked.

"No. I'll try not to take too long."

Pansy nodded. "Call for me if you need anything."

She pressed Hermione's hand and left the room.

The water was hot, searing her skin as she climbed inside the large tub, settling herself within it, but not before leaning back and dipping her hair in the water.

Draco might still want to have sex when he came back from tucking in Lucio, but she wanted to wash off the soot and grim from Knockturn Alley. That, and from the feel of the photographer's eyes crawling all over her, almost salivating at the prospect of how much money they'd get for a good photograph of the Lord and Lady Malfoy.

As she washed herself she wondered if Martin had left already. Most likely. She had been sorry to leave him so quickly, and not have time for a proper conversation earlier that day. She had wanted to ask more about his life, his studies... perhaps find a way to touch him again. To feel arms that weren't Draco's. To feel a heat that didn't threaten to consume her out of a corrupt, gluttonous lust.

Her lids were drooping. The steam curled around her; she could almost feel her hair frizzing from it. She let her eyes close, and let herself relax slowly.

In her dream, Danielle was in her arms again, her blood like the finest silk running down her arms, vibrant and hot. Her gasps were horrible, wet—numbered. Her expression was accusatory, uncomprehending.

Hermione stared down at her, waiting out those last few moments of Danielle's life, watching the color and life drain from her face rapidly. Danielle reached out weakly, her bloodied hand clutching Hermione's stone dress and coming away cut up, ragged, and weeping more fresh blood.

Danielle's eyes were bright but fading. She stared at Hermione without blinking. Her body convulsed a little as if she was trying one last time to rip herself from Hermione's hold.

"I did what I had to," Hermione said to her.

The dagger stuck out from her chest still, a horrible dark energy radiating from it. As she stared at it, Hermione thought she could see a sort of suction in the blood flowing around it, as if the dagger itself was absorbing the blood. Her hands stung as she watched it.

Distantly, Hermione was aware of Draco's presence behind her, of his hand resting on her shoulder—a comfort. A warning.

Danielle gave one last, wet, choked gasp. She went limp, and her body was still.

Hermione reached up, found herself brushing the tears from the dead woman's face. She closed the lids on those blank, pleading eyes—another set of eyes she realized would haunt her forever. The first pair belonged to the presence behind her.

The ground began to rumble, and the dream melted away.

She started wake up, feeling herself in the air, in motion. She gasped, twisted, clutched the first thing she felt—Draco's arms tightened around her.

"It's me," he whispered. The bathroom was dark. He had lifted her from the tub and drained it.

Her pulse raced.

"I tried not to wake you."

"It's okay," she said. He had left her nude. She was still wet, shivering. Droplets of water ran down her body and dripped onto him and the floor. He realized this, muttered a spell to dry her completely.

Swaddled in the warmth of his charm, she let herself be lowered onto the bed. He crawled on after her, up her legs and between her thighs. The room was dark too but she could make out the silhouette of him, the sharp planes of his face, the ice of his eyes. His breath was warm as he breathed onto her. Her nipples were hard, suddenly so sensitive she fancied if he merely breathed on them she would cry out.

"Lie back, Hermione," he murmured, kissing her mound. His hands spread her thighs apart. He bent, gave her one slow lick. "I'll help you get to sleep again."

There was a ripe chance for a barb and they both knew it—she would have uttered it if he hadn't denied her the opportunity by pressing a finger to her clit-still tender from before. At the same time, she found herself drifting back to sleep.

“Too tired,” she murmured. His tongue was already working at her-she felt a slickness rush forth.

“Would you rather sleep?” he asked softly, his fingers pushing inside her.

She bit back a moan. “Yes.”

Let that be your anniversary gift, she sent to him. Do as you please and let me sleep.

As long as I use the contraceptive, he finished. She cracked one eye open to reveal the tantalizing sight of him between her thighs, tonguing her clit, his fingers filling her again. His other hand tugged at his cock.

Does that please you, my Lord? she asked.

He curled his fingers inside her. Her hips bucked-a throaty moan escaped her.

Are you sure you’d rather be asleep? he asked. He had caught her looking at him and raised an eyebrow.

If I don’t make you charm me to sleep now, I’ll be up all night until you’re completely satisfied.

He let out a huff of laughter against her flesh, swollen from his attentions. It tickled.

Too right, he agreed. *As you wish, then.*

He crawled up her form, kissed her on the forehead.

“Goodnight, Hermione,” he said softly, pressing more kisses to her cheeks, then a last on her lips. “I love you. Happy anniversary.”

His spell had already gripped her-he had settled back between her thighs, his eyes flashing red. Her lids were coming slowly but through them she saw something strange. It might have been because she was already falling into sleep and her imagination was revving up to conjure a dream perhaps, but as his hand pumped his cock, his mouth opened and his tongue, longer than was humanely possible and still growing, moving much like a snake, began to stretch toward her. She could see his teeth sharpening. Dread spiked within her-she fought the sleeping spell, but it was too late-her eyes closed and she fell into the cage of sleep.

A/N:

Ok so I’m not exactly sure when Hermione and Draco’s exact wedding anniversary date is (I want to say end of winter/beginning of spring) so I try to always keep it vague. They currently live in a region (again, no specifics because like my future, that detail is ~vague~) that experiences warmer winters. I probably haven’t done a great job of establishing the current time/seasons within the fic but I will later go back and edit that in. I feel like I’m dropping the ball sometimes on important stuff like that but I’M TRYING T-T

21. Death of a Free Man

Merry Christmas !

Draco was awfully cheerful the next morning. She had been on her guard immediately upon noticing the smirk on his face but when she had asked, he'd only taken her hand to lead her to breakfast and said he would tell her later.

Lucio was also in a bright mood, though she sensed how it dimmed as Draco approached their son to greet him. He took him in his arms, lifted him onto his shoulder. Lucio let out a nervous giggle.

"How are you, darling?" Draco asked.

"Good morning, Father." Lucio dutifully pressed a little kiss to Draco's cheek. His smile had vanished. He looked at Hermione as if wanting help. Hermione went at once to take him from Draco, plastered a smile on her face, and bopped the tip of his nose with her finger. Lucio giggled again, his smile restored, and covered his nose with both his hands to keep it from her reach.

"Good morning, mummy."

She gave him a kiss on his chubby cheek. "Good morning, my love. How did you sleep?"

"I had a funny dream," he said, frowning as he tried to remember it. "But I don't remember it."

"How did you know it was funny?" Draco asked, ruffling Lucio's hair.

"Because he was laughing when he woke up," Pansy said as she entered the room, and bowed to them in one graceful movement. "I'd just gone in to open the curtains. He nearly scared the life from me."

"Interesting," Draco said. "Well, Lucio, if you ever remember whatever it was that made you laugh, share it with us. I could use a good laugh."

Breakfast was largely uneventful and strangely... pleasant. Hermione for once wasn't gritting her teeth or clutching her knife with a white-knuckled grip. Draco's elevated spirits cleared away the oppressive atmosphere of the house, and as they all conversed and ate together Hermione found herself almost *warmed* at the feel that this was what family should be like.

It had been too long. Memories of meals with the Weasleys flipped through her mind faster than she could stop them—she barely repressed her flinch. There was no accompanying ache in her chest, thankfully.

Draco appeared not to have noticed. Better that way. She picked up her goblet again, carefully drank from it.

Draco looked at his watch. "Martin will be here soon."

"The tutors, as well," Pansy said, and went to Lucio's seat. "Come, little Lord, you need to prepare."

Once Pansy and Lucio had gone off to the nursery, Draco stood from his chair and went to Hermione's, took her hand, and helped her stand.

"You enjoyed yourself yesterday?" he asked as they made their way out of the dining room.

"Surprisingly, yes."

"I'm glad," he said. "Very glad. Shall we see what today's paper says?"

It was tucked into the armpit of his unoccupied hand. She had not seen him retrieve it at any point. The House Elf must have sent it to him during breakfast.

"If it'll please you," she said, and he smiled, led her the rest of the way to the living room, where he promptly sat down onto his favorite couch, settling himself in comfortably, and then pulled her down into his lap. Not wanting to spoil his mood, Hermione didn't dare protest.

"Let's see—" He unfurled the paper and spread it out before the both of them.

There it was.

"We made the front page." He sounded smug.

"There was never any doubt of that."

He was already reading it quickly, his pale eyes scanning the paper. All she could focus on was the moving photograph of the moment he had snogged her right outside the bookstore.

"Did they have to use that photo?" she asked, frowning at her own image. The photo was in color—unusual for a Prophet article. She was in Draco's hold, bent over as he smothered her with his kiss, her cheeks flushed from his hand squeezing her bum. Smiling.

You really did enjoy yourself.

She pulled to her mind's eye the images they had used in the past, before their deal. Before she had begun to play his game. Her face, pinched with nerves and fear. Draco's hand clamped around her arm, or barring across her back, subtly but forcefully leading her forward. Her face, often blurred, always turning from the cameras in shame. It was a very stark contrast.

What would Neville think? She found herself wondering in dismay. And then caught herself.

No. It doesn't matter anymore. His opinion doesn't matter. They left me to rot.

Anger coiled within her.

"Sweetheart, they love you," Draco said, his voice cutting over her thoughts.

She started, looked away from the photo, and read the title.

*HANDSY LORD AND LADY MALFOY PAY SURPRISE VISIT TO KNOCKTURN ALLEY,
STUN ONLOOKERS.*

It appeared to be an ordinary day in Knockturn Alley yesterday, and so it was until the public was surprised by the sudden presence of Lord and Lady Hermione Malfoy. Sightings of the complete couple are rare, as we know Lady Malfoy as reclusive, so reporters flocked to the scene to ask the beautiful couple why they were suddenly out without prior announcement. Lady Malfoy looked radiant and besotted with her husband. Few could take their eyes off the pair. Lord Malfoy did not take any questions, stating that they wanted to celebrate their anniversary in peace. Our rare opportunity was lost, and their wishes were respected—but the Prophet photographers were still able to catch this shot of the two “canoodling” in the street. On the behalf of the crew at the Prophet, we would like to wish them a happy anniversary, and that we hope to see the happy couple out and about more often!

“Ugh,” Hermione said, unable to help herself.

Draco laughed. “Top-tier journalism, isn’t it?”

He didn’t bother going through the rest of the paper and tossed it onto the desk. Hermione eyed it, planning to finish the rest once he left.

“I was sure Longbottom would have acted by now,” he said. His arms locked around her stomach, trapping her to him. “He’s hasty enough these days that I’d expected it sooner.”

Hermione raised a brow. “It’s obvious you did it to set him off. Of course he wasn’t going to bite immediately.”

“Well yes, I wanted to ruin his morning. I also wanted to show you off *and* celebrate. But I need to reel him out of the water, first, and we still have time to see whether it worked or not. But, say it doesn’t...” He raised a brow at her. “Any ideas, my love?”

Hermione met his eye, leaned back against him and took his chin in her hand, assessed him coolly.

“Obviously.”

Draco grinned. His arms went lax around her.

“Let’s hear them, then.”

She stood from his lap swiftly, taking a large stride in case he tried to snatch her back, and began to pace.

“The first involves leaving a message—covert or not, to draw him out. I could write something, say I want to talk to him.”

He pondered it.

“He might think I wrote that.”

“Not if I make sure he sees me dropping it off.”

“How will you know he’ll see you doing it?”

"I'll make a visit to Diagon Alley this time," she said. "Word will spread. If it's just me he might take the risk to go follow me."

He was weighing it in his head. His hand ran through his hair.

"What's the other idea? I know there's another."

Hermione squared her shoulders.

"I go into public alone and draw him out. You know where he's been active last. Or I could go back to the Burrow and wait there. You stay here and wait until I summon you or you can conceal yourself and stay close until he arrives. I distract him, pretend I've freed myself, and then you come in."

He was nodding. "I like it. It's bold."

"I can't guarantee results, but I'm fairly confident in it." She looked away. "I'm sure he'll know it's a trap regardless, but he'll come anyway."

"Yes, you had that little agreement, didn't you?" Draco asked. "Maybe he'll come hoping that you'll be brave enough to cross me then."

"Years ago, I might still have tried," she said. "But I wouldn't dare leave without Lucio. Perhaps if I could make him think I had Lucio with me, that would be more convincing."

"But he'll be here the entire time, right, darling wife?" he asked pointedly. "Because you wouldn't be so foolish to think I'd actually approve *that* part of the plan."

"Of course he'll be here," Hermione said coolly, and then made herself give him a coy smile. "What, don't you trust me?"

Draco saw the challenge in her eyes, and a smirk crept across his face.

"A little more every day," he replied.

Draco left shortly after on undisclosed business. Hermione hadn't cared to ask. When he was gone, she went to find Martin in the library. He had quickly become a permanent fixture in the manor, and Hermione sometimes pictured him as a marble statue standing there by the window, his eyes focused and his raised arm holding his brush, the other supporting his palette.

He heard her enter this time and turned to her as she approached.

"He isn't here," Hermione said, after he'd opened his mouth to utter his greeting, but faltered and looked around covertly.

"Oh," he said, and smiled, relaxed. "Hello, then."

"Hello."

She came to a stop beside him, assessed the painting.

"How do you work so quickly?"

Draco's imperious stare held her gaze. The fine details of his face, hair and clothing were almost lifelike. She felt as if she could reach out and touch the flat canvas, she would meet the 3d planes of his face instead, feel the textured skin and stubble under her fingertips.

"Years of practice. Also, with the number of paintings I've been commissioned to do, I feel I must," Martin said. "As much as an honor this is, I don't want this project to take up too much of my time. No offense meant."

"No," she replied. "I understand. I wouldn't want to deal with some wizard's ego-boosting portraits either, if I could paint whatever I wanted."

Martin stared at her for a beat and then let out a loud laugh.

"That's very close to what I was thinking," he admitted.

"Don't worry," she said. "I won't tell."

He let out a nervous laugh.

There was a knock at the door.

"My Lady," Pansy said, entering and bowing. "May I speak with you?"

Martin had resumed painting as if nothing had happened. Hermione went to Pansy quickly.

"What is it?" Hermione asked. "Is something wrong? Is Draco back?"

"He isn't back but I sent for him," Pansy said. She looked grave. "Nott just arrived... it's urgent."

"Oh." Disappointed, Hermione followed her to the foyer. She had wanted to spend more time talking to Martin.

Nott—*Theodore*—was waiting in the foyer, standing straight and still but his eyes urgent, almost crackling with excitement.

"Is my Lord not here?" he asked, after he had bowed to Hermione.

"Pansy has summoned him," she replied. "What's happened? What news do you bring?"

There was a loud rustle behind her—she knew at once it was Draco, and was proved correct when she heard his loud, long stride lead up behind her until he was at her side, his arm around her waist, pulling her close.

"There's just been an attack in Knockturn Alley," Theodore said. "An explosion. Longbottom's doing."

There it was. The response they had been waiting for. Draco squeezed her and smiled. She was frozen in place.

"How do you know?" Hermione asked.

"He didn't try to run this time. He's been apprehended."

"Was anyone harmed?"

Theodore nodded, looking grim. “They’re still recovering bodies. They’d collected at least five when I left the scene.”

“He’s finally realized his situation, has he?” Draco said. “A desperate man will lash out when he realizes there’s nowhere left to go.”

“What caused the explosion?” Hermione asked.

“Looks like he used magic for that,” Theodore said. “But they’re looking into whether he used an explosive device, too.”

“You said they apprehended him,” Draco said.

“Yes, my Lord,” Theodore replied. “That’s why I’m here. He’s been captured by the Aurors, and he said he won’t resist, but he wants to talk to you, my Lord.”

“What?” Hermione asked.

“He’s demanded to see you both at once.”

Draco looked at Hermione. His eyes gleamed with excitement.

“Well, let’s not leave him waiting.”

By the time they arrived at the crime scene most of the debris had been cleared, and the row of bodies were laid out on the floor, yet to be covered.

Hermione felt chilled as they approached. A strange siren was going off in the area—she had never heard it before. All shoppers and wanderers were long gone, scared off by the destruction. It had happened outside a clothes shop, and its front window and display were completely in ruin, with glass and brick strewn around like lethal confetti. Blood lay in puddles, still slowly creeping around the cobblestone.

It was a stark contrast, this silence, to how busy Knockturn had been just the previous day. There was no music playing now, no chattering ambience from people walking around. A strange, erratic energy suffused the air, made the hair along her arms and neck stand on end.

Dementors waited at the end of the street they arrived on, waiting their summons. There were Aurors everywhere, some still sorting out the destruction in and around the damaged shop, but most clustered in a group directly in front of Draco and Hermione. Deep within that snarl of cloaked bodies and grim set faces, Hermione could see a familiar figure with only one ear: Neville.

An Auror walked up to them.

“My Lord.” He bowed. He was around their age if not a little younger, with a thick mustache and dark hair, and had sharp but tired eyes that flicked from Draco to Hermione as he spoke. ‘Lady Malfoy.’ He shook her hand, too. “I’m Evander Demarand. Lead Auror of the Terrorist Acts and Security Department.”

“A pleasure,” Hermione said. “Despite the circumstances.”

He nodded. "The same to you, my Lady." He jerked his head in Neville's direction. The Aurors swarming him largely obstructed him from view but Hermione could sense his hostile stare on them. She tried to meet his eye but somebody stepped in front of him. She focused back on Evander.

"He says he will speak to you both before he leaves. We've got him restrained, but the only reason we're entertaining his demand is because he says he's got an explosive device planted somewhere else here, and he won't tell where it is until he's seen you."

"How dramatic," Draco said, and looked at the row of bodies. "How many dead?"

"Ten. Possibly more. The roof caved in partially at the back of the shop, and they're trying to clear it up to see if there's any more bodies to recover."

"Is there actually another explosive?" Hermione asked.

"We are trying to determine that," Evander replied, gesturing to a group of Aurors with their wands drawn, scanning the exterior of the buildings around them before heading inside. There were more of these groups spread out around the immediate vicinity. "We've evacuated all residents from the area to be safe."

"Has the news reached the Minister?" Draco asked.

"Most likely. I doubt he'll come. Protocol requires the Minister to go into a safe area in case of another attack. We've even had to bar the media from coming in."

"Better that way," Draco said. "No need to put more lives at risk for the sake of an article."

"I don't mean to pry, my Lord, but seeing as Longbottom has such an interest in you, what's your relation to this man?"

"We went to school together," Draco said. "He, my wife, and I. He was in love with her and became irrational and jealous when she and I got together. He's been harassing us for years, spreading slander about our relationship. I guess it finally culminated into this."

He lied so smoothly it almost impressed her. Evander seemed to have no suspicions—or if he did, he hid them well. She wondered why he seemed to trust Draco so implicitly.

Evander nodded. He glanced at Hermione.

"He seems to believe you are in danger, my Lady."

Draco scoffed. "She isn't afraid of him. *He's* the danger, as we've all learned today."

"Too right. Will you be wanting to see him as well?" Evander asked her. "We will not pressure you, but it may help subdue him."

"Has he been resisting?" Draco asked.

"Hasn't said a word since we apprehended him."

"I'll go," Hermione said. She shook her head, let sorrow pull at the muscles of her face. "I can't believe he did this. This *has* to end."

Evander escorted them to the cluster of Aurors. By now Hermione could see Neville more clearly—and suppressed a gasp.

A desperate man, indeed.

He had never looked so unkempt. His hair was long and dirty, his face pale and tired, his clothes torn and unwashed, but his stance was still strong, his expression hard as he stared straight at them. His hands were restrained at his front by two large metal cuffs that looked rather heavy, and had runes carved into them that glowed red. Hermione suspected they kept him from using magic, even if he had no wand.

She wanted to run to him, hug him. She wanted to cry for him. But she pushed those instincts away and glanced at the row of bodies lying on the ground, because this was not the same Neville who had been such a close friend as much as she was not the same Hermione.

He was staring at her and noticed when she looked at the bodies. When she looked at him again his face was less resolute, but only slightly—his lips tightened into a thin line, his eyes also went tight, as if he were holding back a sob. But it was gone within seconds, and he turned his stare onto Draco.

“Order your people to stand back,” Draco said to Evander. “If he lashes out again somehow, I wouldn’t want more casualties.”

“We’re trained to expect such things,” Evan said. “I’m afraid there isn’t much room for privacy in a situation like this if that was what you wanted, my Lord.”

Draco held his stare. “I insist.”

An unspoken agreement seemed to pass through them—and Hermione found herself wondering suddenly if Draco could project his thoughts into other’s minds aside from hers.

“Of course, my Lord,” Evander said at last. Strangely, he did not seem upset. “He is yours.”

The Aurors formed a wide berth around them. Evander followed, went a short distance away to speak to one of the groups that was scanning another building.

Hermione frowned.

“Good,” Draco said. He turned, looked at Neville. “I knew you were crazy, Longbottom, but I’d never have expected this from you.”

Neville laughed bitterly. “Who are you to talk to me about what’s crazy and what isn’t?”

Draco smiled. “I think we’re on a more even field now along those terms.”

The siren was still going. Hermione wanted it to stop. It was giving her a headache.

“I got your attention, which was what I wanted,” Neville said. “But the difference is that I take no pleasure in what I did.”

“You didn’t have to kill these many people,” Hermione said. “If you wanted to talk, we could have worked out a truce.”

“There’s no room for truces anymore,” Neville said. “Your husband wouldn’t have listened. He would have ambushed me anyway.”

Draco nodded. “Obviously.” And he waited.

“You know what I want,” Neville said after a long moment. For a moment, the fierce edge to him wavered. “Let Luna go. I’m already in custody.”

“The time for mercy is long gone,” Draco said coldly. “She attacked my men and conspired to run away with my wife. She’s as much of a danger as you are.”

Neville twitched, as if he’d meant to lunge at Draco—the Aurors around them snapped to attention, a dozen wands brandished and ready to fire.

Hermione glanced at Evander. He had gone into the building with the small group.

Draco held up his hand in a gesture for the Aurors to fall back. They obeyed, lowering their wands. Hermione stared, her frown deepening.

“You’re still as impulsive as you were before,” Draco was saying to Neville, sneering. “But you’re learning your lesson, that’s good. Why did you make all this mess just to draw us out?”

As if you hadn’t dragged me out into the public yesterday just to enrage him, Hermione thought.

Neville had the same thought, because he scoffed.

“You parade your captive around town like you’re such a happy couple,” he said, his voice low and croaking. “You may have gagged everyone else but I see right through it.”

“I don’t appreciate you calling my wife a captive,” Draco said coolly. “She’s as free as a bird. Aren’t you, sweetheart?”

Neville’s eyes turned to her, hurt, hateful... yet still hopeful.

It’s too late, she wanted to say. *It was always too late.*

“I am,” Hermione said. She hesitated, stepped closer to Neville. “I want this to end, Neville... I’m tired of it.”

His neck bent—she heard a dry swallow.

“I know,” he said, his voice lower still. “I am, too.”

“I wish you hadn’t done this,” Hermione said.

“Luna’s your hostage, every day I’ve got less and less people behind me, my gran’s dead, and I couldn’t save you.” He scoffed, shook his head. “What else was I supposed to do?”

“Before you feel too sorry for him, Hermione,” Draco interjected, “why don’t you ask him to tell you what he’s done?”

Neville’s hands were bunching into fists within their restraints.

“You’ll have to be more specific.”

Draco’s smile widened. “About Danielle.”

There was a long pause.

“She worked for me as a messenger,” Neville said eventually. Suddenly he wouldn’t meet Hermione’s gaze. “She had almost been captured once before. I realized your men were tracking her. I tried to protect her but couldn’t spare anyone to guard her. When the Eyes found us, it was Luna, Danielle, and I in the same place. They’d put anti-Apparition wards on our hideout. We had to run past its perimeter to be able to get away. We all nearly made it, but Luna got hit... we slowed down, and they almost got to us.”

Understanding hit her like a cold raindrop on warm skin.

“You made sure they got Danielle instead,” she said.

He paused. Finally met her eyes, shook his head. “Yes.”

“Tell me.”

“I Obliviated her,” he admitted. “I took Luna, dragged her beyond the ward, and left Danielle behind. I figured they would back off for a while if they had at least one hostage. And they did.”

Hermione had gone cold.

“You sacrificed her.”

“*To save Luna.*” Neville’s narrowed eyes were on Draco. “You would have done the same, if Hermione’s life were ever in danger and you had a way to save her.”

“Naturally,” Draco replied. “I almost respect you for it.”

“How did you know?” Neville asked. “You broke through the Obliviate?”

“Took less than a minute. I saw everything.”

Neville fought back a wince.

Draco turned to Hermione. “He’s got more stories, if you care to know them.” He took her face in his hands. “You thought I was trying to manipulate you when I told you he was different. Now you see for yourself what he’s become.”

“I see it,” she said softly. She tried to look remorseful. “I’m sorry I doubted you, my Lord.”

He kissed her gently. “I was only acting in your best interest.”

“You’ve brainwashed her into playing along,” Neville said suddenly, sounding revolted. “Hermione, please. Snap out of it. The only interest he acts on is his own.”

I know that, she wanted to shout, suddenly angry. *I’ve always known that.*

The Aurors were still around them—Hermione briefly focused on a few of their faces. Strangely, their expressions looked quite out of focus. As if they had been Confunded. Draco must have sensed her confusion because he sent back a sense of certainty that only confirmed to her that he was behind it. The skin along her arms prickled. How long had they been under his influence?

“I know you didn’t want to kill her,” Neville was saying to her. “I don’t blame you. I know he made you do it.”

Draco had pulled away from her but his arm was still around her waist. She closed her eyes, looked down. A breeze stirred her hair—it had grown quite overcast during this whole exchange. The atmosphere was heavy with the promise of rain.

“You’re wrong,” she heard herself say, and Neville’s expression faltered. “I wanted to kill her.”

She opened her eyes. He was frowning now. “What?”

“I said I *wanted* to kill her,” she said firmly. “I wanted my magic back so badly that I killed her for it. And so she wouldn’t be turned into another slave like I was.”

“You’re no longer a slave,” Draco reminded her. “You never were. I made you my wife the very night I took you.”

“Switch the words any way you like,” she said stiffly. “You always treated me like your slave.”

She looked back at Neville, who was now staring warily at her.

“I warned you,” she said. “And Luna. I warned you both not to come for me.”

“I told Luna not to let herself get captured,” Neville said sharply. “I gave you Danielle just so she would be safe.”

“Yet Danielle is dead, and we have Lovegood regardless,” Draco said, sounding bored. “You’ve lost, Longbottom. You’re going to face justice for what you’ve done. Accept it.”

“I already have,” Neville said. “Why do you think I’m not resisting? Let Luna go. That’s all I ask.”

“No,” Draco said. “I have you both now. If my wife wants an end to this, it will be done.”

Neville’s frown deepened.

Hermione was watching the other Aurors. The alertness in their expressions had returned. Whether they knew or suspected they had been tampered with, none of them seemed to realize.

Footsteps registered from their left, and Evander approached them, his wand at his side.

“Happy reunion?” he asked.

“Quite the opposite,” Draco said. “Old rivalries die slowly.”

“Well,” Evander said, shaking his head. He tucked his wand away into an inner pocket on his black coat. “The search is still underway, Longbottom. We gave you what you wanted. Where is the second explosive?”

Neville wouldn’t look away from Hermione. He seemed almost afraid. She stared back solemnly.

You left me to this fate.

“It’s in a lavatory in the post office,” he said, finally managing to tear his eyes away. “In the mirror cabinet over the sink.”

"That had better be the truth," Evander said. "Magnus, Amelia," he barked.

Two Aurors stood at attention.

"Go find it. Isolate it." He looked at Neville. "Can it be detonated easily or will we need to call in reinforcements?"

"It's a Muggle device," Neville replied, sounding numb. "Cut the red wire and it will turn off."

Evander nodded to Magnus and Amelia, who set off at once in the direction of the post office.

"A Muggle bomb," Evander muttered. "Last time our kind had to deal with one of those was 1963."

"One would need extraordinary power to cause that same amount of damage with only a wand," Draco replied. "Very few have been known to manage it."

"Let's hope this one's the last," Evander said, shaking his head. His eyes were on the shrouded bodies lying in the street. "He'll rot in Azkaban for this. I'll make sure of it."

Draco had a strange smile on his face. Hermione felt herself go tense in reaction to seeing it.

"You *could* let him spend the rest of his days in a cell."

Evander noticed the implication here and looked at Draco from the corner of his eye.

"You want him, then."

"He'll be guaranteed to suffer more in my hands."

Evander frowned. "He'll be expected at the Ministry. There's paperwork to be done and an official interrogation."

"*The Minister will see me if he has an issue,*" Draco said smoothly. "But seeing as Longbottom was struck and killed by debris of the wreckage of his own making, I think it would serve no real loss to this community that he is dead now, isn't it?"

Evander understood at once. "I will make the necessary arrangements, my Lord."

"Excellent," Draco said. He withdrew a very fat and heavy pouch full of galleons and handed it to him. "Another donation will follow once news of his death comes out."

Hermione watched, stunned.

Corruption within the Ministry was not unheard of, but she had never pictured it so disgustingly bold. She looked at the other Aurors to see if they were outraged, but conveniently, all of them had their backs turned.

They're all in on it, sweetheart, Draco said. *Evander might lead them, but they all listen to me.*

"Draco," she said, but then stopped short, not knowing what she actually wanted to say. If she reproached him he would get angry and punish her. Nobody here could help her. The only

option was to say nothing and play along.

Draco sensed her distress.

"It's alright," he said gently. "Look at your best friend, sweetheart. Neville Longbottom dies today, and our household gains another servant."

Neville's face was puce. Hermione's, in turn, had gone pale.

"No," he snarled, suddenly straining against his restraints. Everyone around him except Hermione immediately launched forward, ready to intercept. "No. I'd rather die."

Draco laughed. "You just did, fool."

Hermione grabbed his wrist.

"*Draco—*"

"We'll discuss this later, sweetheart," he said, brushing her off, and strode forward to grip Neville by the arm. Neville recoiled, but it was too late—Draco had reached out, grasped a chunk of his hair close to the roots, and tore it out. Neville grimaced. His coat was removed by magic next, and Draco handed them to Evander, who had come forward to collect them.

"Do what you have to. He is dead to the world and everyone saw him die by the debris falling."

"Of course, my Lord."

"No!" Neville shouted.

"Silence," Draco snapped. "You gave up your freedom when you pulled this stunt."

His hands were bound, but Neville still tried to raise them to strike at Draco, who merely laughed and held out his hand, his fingers outstretched.

Thinking he was going to cast the killing curse, Hermione found herself instinctively stepping forward, but Draco spoke too quickly.

"*Imperio.*"

She went still, absently relieved as she watched Neville's demeanor turn passive and compliant. He lowered his hands and stared at Draco as if waiting another order.

"Don't make a fuss," Draco said sternly, but his sadistic grin belied his joy. "You've caused enough damage in one day."

"I'll be back for him in a moment," Draco said to Evander, who nodded. "Watch him."

He seized Hermione's arm and before she could speak, turned on his heel.

They arrived back at the Manor in the same instant. Hermione immediately turned to him.

"I thought you were just going to kill him."

He grabbed her by the face, pulled her in for a heated kiss. Their teeth clashed together as she tried to speak again. She winced, tried to stall him, her hands pressing against his chest.

"*Draco—*"

"I *am* going to kill him, love of mine," he said when he broke the kiss, panting slightly. His eyes danced with excitement. "But I want him to suffer first."

She stared at him bleakly as he turned on his heel again, disappeared.

She waited there for a few minutes, expecting his arrival quickly, but when it was clear he was not returning yet, Hermione turned sharply and went in search of Pansy.

22. The Welcoming Party (part I)

This chapter is a two-parter because in total it's about 57 (and I'm STILL editing so that number is likely to change) pages long and I know we're all avid readers and it's been so long since the last update but I don't want to bombard you with too much in one sitting. That being said, I've missed you all and I'm sorry I was gone for so long. The break I took turned out longer than expected because of burn-out but good things came out of it, things that I can turn to after this series is over, and it will save me from floundering about with nothing to do. Closing out this series has been a very bittersweet experience while writing alone, so I look forward to hearing your thoughts as we go along. I had many many many moments during that break where I just felt lazy about writing and had no interest in continuing (specifically for this story). To anyone who messaged me or left a review during that time asking about updates, I just want to say a special thank you to you all because that helped pull me out of those slumps.

If you would like some musical accompaniment to go along with the reading, may I direct you to my profile? There's a link to the new HLB playlist I made on Spotify. It has lots of new tracks along with the originals from the 8tracks playlist, all curated by this ding-dong right here.

Alright-enough delays. Enjoy.

(Chapter 23 coming Dec. 11)

"It wasn't supposed to go this way," Hermione said softly. They had been standing in the foyer for a while in a tense silence, waiting. She was staring out the window since Draco's departure. Her hands at her sides wanted to fidget but she repressed the urge, knowing it would only make herself more anxious.

Out of the corner of her eye she could see Pansy nod in sympathy.

"I wanted it to be over quickly," Hermione continued. 'Like a snap of the fingers. Then peace—or whatever meager equivalent I'm allotted.' She let out a soft, bitter snort. "If my life has proved anything, it's that there will be no happy ending."

"Don't think that," Pansy said, frowning. "Maybe you will. There might still be a chance."

Hermione's expression was one of irrefutable doubt.

"If I can't have peace, then I'll claim it for my son. At any cost necessary."

Pansy nodded. Another long silence lapsed between them.

"Would you want to come with me?" Hermione asked, breaking the stillness. Her eyes were stuck on the far-off horizon, the setting sun. She could not bring herself to turn away from the window's view, afraid of what her dearest friend's response would be. "If I manage to get out?"

Pansy swallowed. “The vows I took... I doubt I could betray him like that, even if wanted to.”

“If I managed to get out several times, you might be able to,” Hermione said. “You are bound to *both* of us, aren’t you? I want you to come with me. I’ll order it if I have to. You don’t deserve to be stuck here any more than I or Lucio do. Vow or not.”

Pansy doubted she could. Like Hermione had been bound by her ring, she was bound by the mark on her arm. She doubted it would ever fade. And Lord Malfoy had designed it to check her if she dared to act against his order. Bolts of pain so sharp and deep she couldn’t even cry out, or Draco’s Cruciatus was embeded into the magic somehow, waiting to be unleashed like venom in her veins—he himself had warned her about them, had informed her how the same magic was in Hermione’s ring.

When he’d ever had the time to research and develop such spells, she never knew. Perhaps they had been passed on by Voldemort... perhaps he had found them within some ancient and forbidden book on dark magic... perhaps he had taken it upon himself to learn and craft them in that year after he had killed Dumbledore and gone into hiding from the world. He had told her years ago that he had in fact trained under Voldemort and his aunt to grow his power, but he said nothing else about what he had done in that time, and, sensing that it was just as horrific as his other actions, Pansy had never pressed further.

Not that Pansy had ever tried to test against her restraints... she had always been too afraid, and her vows were so strict there really wasn’t much wiggle room for anything other than obedience. It made her job simultaneously easier and more difficult.

She had always admired Hermione for her strength. Draco had purposefully neglected to tell her that Hermione was very much his unwilling wife (and she herself had ignorantly assumed the rumors were true, and that they had eloped) upon her entry to the manor. He had shown her her quarters, assigned her that long list of duties, and then let her walk into his bedroom only to find the picture of non-consent and unhappiness. And *then*, afterwards in his study he’d deigned to tell her the parts he had omitted. At that point it was too late to back out. She had been branded. She had seen too much. And to see Hermione Granger suffer like that had filled her with pity, at first—but then, thinking back on what Draco had told her and what Hermione herself had confirmed later, Pansy couldn’t help but admire her for her strength.

To continually fight in the face of the possibly insurmountable. To refuse to bend to a tyrant. Pansy was present in so much of their daily lives, lingering off to the side or by the door in case she was needed—she heard every quip, every blade-like thrust of Hermione’s words towards Lord Malfoy.

Pansy could never laugh, or she would be punished. And she daren’t smile, paranoid that somehow Lord Malfoy would sense it. But on the inside, where he couldn’t reach her, Pansy always cheered.

There was sound and movement in the hallway suddenly—the sound of Draco’s quiet Apparition had them going to meet him.

Hermione saw Neville first, still Imperiused and emotionally removed from his own dire situation and standing behind her husband, his hands unbound. Draco was just shrugging off his own cloak in one fluid motion, tossing it carelessly to the floor, too excited to bother magicking it off.

Hermione heard the soft click of Pansy's fingers and watched the coat vanish—likely to a closet, or to her quarters to be cleaned and pressed.

Draco was smiling. His eyes gleamed with some manic happiness. It set Hermione on edge again.

He raised his hand, his palm splayed out and facing Neville.

“Finite Incantatem.”

The film slowly disappeared from Neville's eyes as his consciousness returned. As it ebbed he focused on Draco and then Hermione. She saw the nervous dart of his eyes as he looked around to gauge where he was, visibly confused, his memories still catching up to him. He blinked beneath a scowl, his eyes on the three of them as if he expected any one of them to pounce at any moment.

“Welcome Longbottom,” Draco said, ever the gracious host. “You're in your new home... for the time being.”

Neville said nothing. His jaw was set tightly. A vein bulged in his throat.

Draco shook his head, still smiling. “There's no use fighting anymore. Swallow that resistance. Your life belongs to me.”

“Then take it,” Neville said with such force that his voice bounced in an echo around the large room. “Take it and let Luna go. Torture me as much as you want. Just don't touch her.”

“You've swapped yourself out for my prisoners enough by now,” Draco said, bored. “It's lost its meaning. I commend you your bravery, however. Now if you're going to chatter on about this more I'll take your tongue just like I took your ear.”

“What are you going to do with him?” Hermione asked.

“I thought Pansy might like company around the house,” Draco said. “She is extremely capable, but you were right, my love. She *does* deserve a break. Who better to help her with her duties than your old friend?”

Pansy's expression flickered with confusion. “A break, my Lord?”

“I hadn't realized how long you've gone without one,” Draco said to her. “My dear wife had to remind me. Time does fly here, doesn't it? You've proved yourself invaluable and of immeasurable trust, and I trust you enough to let you take some time off to use however you please—as long as you return when it is over.”

She looked a little unsure but bowed her head. “You are very considerate, my Lord. Thank you.”

“We don't need anyone else for help,” Hermione said to Draco. “I can manage on my own.”

“Nonsense,” Draco said loftily. “Our home is only going to get busier from now on. It feels rather like a mausoleum at times, doesn’t it? New faces are always welcome here.”

The gleam in his eye was anything but welcoming. He looked at Hermione.

“I’m quite firm on this, sweetling. He stays.” He gave her an amused smile. “Where is the fun in ending him now?”

This isn’t about fun, my Lord, Hermione sent to him. I told you I want this to end. Why drag it on for longer than necessary?

Draco took her hand—his hold was a little too tight.

It’s the proper way to say goodbye, isn’t it? He sent back.

Neville’s eyes were mutinous, but he said nothing. The air between the four of them was charged, volatile with emotion. It made the hair along Hermione’s arms stand on end. It needed no saying, really, but the sense of dread that was settling over them now foretold that this situation would not end well. As if she hadn’t already known that. Again, she wished Draco had just killed him outright back in Knockturn Alley. Or that she had done it before he’d even had a chance to open his mouth.

“You see my point,” Draco was saying, sounding pleased. “Good. Now—Pansy.”

Pansy stepped forward and joined Draco, watching him expectantly.

“We officially have a new addition to the household,” Draco said, gesturing to Neville. “I’m sure you remember our old classmate.”

Whatever Pansy felt as she looked at Neville she did not show. Her face was impassive as she studied him for a moment and he stared back warily, holding his tongue, not knowing what to make of her.

Hermione also watched her closely, wondering what she was thinking.

“Welcome, Longbottom,” she said to Neville. Her tone was polite. “It is good to see you.”

He did not reply.

Pansy finally looked back at Draco.

“Congratulations, my Lord. You have him at last.”

“Thank you,” Draco said, chuffed. ‘The fool practically gave himself to me.’ He looked at Hermione. “And he wouldn’t be the first gift that walked right into my hands.”

Hermione bristled, a hateful shudder racing up her spine.

“Take him upstairs,” Draco said to Pansy. “He’ll need to wash all that filth off. Tell him everything he needs to know, give him a room close to yours and new clothes and watch him. I’ll come up to make the Vow and brand him soon.”

Outraged, Neville looked from Draco to Pansy. “You can’t be serious.”

“Do not question your Lord,” Draco said, going to Hermione and wrapping his arm tightly around her waist. “And don’t look so troubled—you won’t be the only one. Pansy, show him

yours.”

Obediently, Pansy pulled up the sleeve of her robe, raised her wrist for Neville to see the Malfoy crest there, as vivid as the day it had been cast under her skin.

“See? You’ll match. Even my darling wife hasn’t gone unscathed. Show him, sweetheart.”

Biting her tongue, Hermione showed Neville the thin, scarred M that Draco had long-ago carved into the crook of her elbow.

Draco reached up, brushed her hair away from her neck.

“Don’t forget this one.”

His hand came around her throat, pulled the fabric of her dress away from her collarbone to reveal the scarred bitemark that had never faded.

He traced over it gently.

“My personal favorite.”

His eyes were locked onto Neville’s as if daring him to try to attack.

Neville looked disgusted.

“You piss in all the corners of your house, too?”

Draco laughed. “I do like to mark what’s mine.”

Neville looked away. “You’re vile.”

“So says my wife,” Draco replied, smirking. “But despite the branding, I think you’ll find I treat my possessions with great care.”

Hermione could not laugh out loud so she did it mentally and loaded it with derision, with the intention of her husband hearing it.

She felt his hand grope her ass hard in response and tried not to jump.

I might treat you a little more roughly, little bird, but we both know you can take it. Plus, you’re the only one allowed to bite back.

Hermione *barely* repressed a snort.

At the same time, Neville was saying, “You’ve deluded yourself that much, have you? I remember Hermione being found beaten black and blue at the Burrow, bones broken, blood all over her. *Barely* conscious. All by *your* hand.” His fists were clenched. “If she hadn’t managed to get away from you that time, you’d have killed her.”

Hermione went still. There was a short pause. She remembered that day vividly though she did not revisit the memory if she could help it. Draco’s hand came up to stroke her cheek gently. There was almost a look of regret on his face as he looked at her. She couldn’t look away, startled.

“Our dear Hermione still had a horribly rebellious streak to her at the time,” Draco said, his voice soft. “I had to teach her a lesson though it broke my heart to do it. She learned it thoroughly, and I’ve not raised a hand to her in years.”

“He’s right,” Hermione said, unprompted, surprising them all. “He’s taught me well.”

Neville’s stare was sad, disbelieving.

“Take him away, Pansy,” Draco said, and then looked at Neville again. ‘He desperately needs training of his own. Your first lesson will be to learn to hold your tongue.’ He gave him a cold smile. “I’m sure you’ll learn that one quickly.”

He motioned to Pansy.

Pansy looked at Neville. “Follow me.”

When they had gone from view, Draco immediately pushed Hermione into the nearest wall.

She collided against it roughly with a grunt. He followed her and pressed his body to hers. The rush of his excited breaths fanned over her. His hands were on the sides of her head and he crushed their lips together, claiming her lips so ferociously that all Hermione could do was grasp his arms and let him.

He finally broke free and met her eye.

His stare was predatory. Hungry. His eyes burned her wherever they landed.

He had been so outwardly calm mere moments ago—Hermione found herself already breathless.

The speed at which his demeanor changed frightened her still after years of being his captive.

“Well, wife,” he said, “aren’t you going to congratulate me?”

His hands were tearing at her clothing. First her dress, then her knickers. He hardly ever bothered with zippers, ties, or buttons—seams ripped, fabric split. He had always loved ruin. His hands grasped, pulled, tore. Hermione winced, watching reddened marks appear on her skin from his force. He was pressing against her, his hips insistent and grinding on her. She could only cling to him, let him take.

“Congratulations, Draco,” she said. “You finally have everything you wanted.”

“No,” he said in between pressing kisses to her throat. He was undoing his trousers. “Not quite. Not yet. I won’t be satisfied until I see the life fly from him and Lovegood. Until we give Lucio siblings and cement our legacy.”

He had taken her breasts, played with them roughly. She shivered, her nipples hardening. His mouth latched onto her throat. His thigh pushed between hers. Hermione reached down, took his erection, began to stroke, her thumb teasing at the glans.

“What legacy?” she asked breathlessly. “You have accomplished nothing but ruin.”

“Only to rebuild, and have things done the *right* way,” he said, his tongue stroking her pulse point in her throat. “*Our* way.”

She reached up with her other hand, took his chin and tilted his head back, forcing him to look her in the eye.

“Promise me something, Draco,” she said, stroking his cock slowly. His eyelids fluttered in pleasure. She felt him shiver in her hands.

“Anything,” he murmured. ‘Anything for you, firebird.’ He chuckled. “Aside from freedom. But that’s not what you’re going to ask me for, is it?”

“Promise me it ends with this. Once they’re dead, you won’t go take over anything else.”

His thumbs dragged over her nipples again and again in tight circles. She was growing wetter by the second.

“What’s wrong with that?” he asked, giving her a playful pout. His gaze was scorching.

“You have me,” Hermione said firmly. “You have Lucio. The Ministry. You have Neville and Luna. You have no enemies left willing to fight you. You’ve got more money and power than you’ll ever need. Isn’t that enough? What more could you want?”

A smile spread across his lips, so devastatingly beautiful. He dipped his head briefly, causing her thumb to slip from his chin. He took it in his mouth, licked the pad of her finger with his tongue, enveloping the tip with his mouth, sucking on it slightly, maintaining eye contact all the while.

Need blazed inside her. Hermione cursed inwardly.

“Everything, sweetling,” he breathed when he had let her thumb go from his mouth. “I’ll take everything. Not because I want it. Because I can.”

“Draco—”

“Nothing’s going to stop me,” he interrupted. “And you’ll be there with me every step of the way.”

He took her face in his hands, gave her one bruising kiss after another, stealing her breath. Their breathing was hot and rushed, filling each other’s ears. His hands were in her hair. Hers were on the back of his neck. He nipped her from time to time, careful enough to not draw blood. Her lips were swollen and glistening when he finally pulled away—her eyes were lowered, strands of hair had fallen across her face.

He took a moment to brush them away, waiting as she caught her breath. His eyes were fixed on her. She forced herself to meet his eye, meeting the raw hunger there.

“You’ve been so good,” he breathed, smiling. “I’m so proud of you, Hermione.”

I’ll take you down, she thought, guarding those words inside her. Outwardly, she smiled, making sure it reached her eyes. His hands were travelling down to her waist and below, groping here and there. Hermione made herself arch into him.

When he finally pushed inside her she moaned, her head falling back to rest against the wall. Draco held her up easily, his mouth ravaging her throat again. The flesh there was sensitive by now and she gasped. He stilled for a moment, eyes electric, capturing hers.

“Buried inside you, my enemies in my fist—” He rolled his hips, pushing deeper. This time her moan echoed loudly around the room. “I’m the happiest man in the world.”

When Draco came up to the room later he found Neville there, washed and dressed in his new robes of servitude.

Draco assessed him for a moment. Longbottom stared back, his eyes like ice. He looked wooden, inanimate... but not quite defeated. Like an undercurrent of hate and rebellion ran through him. Like he still expected to be able to escape at some point down the line.

It gave Draco such a thrill to sense it... almost taste it. Hermione had been his first challenge. Now here was another. He had learned so much these past few years. Breaking one's spirit was something he'd acquired a skill for... and a hunger.

I'll gorge myself on yours until there's nothing left, he thought. And it won't take as long as Hermione's did.

Pansy was by the window and bowed at Draco's entry. Neville remained standing.

Draco went to stand by the bed. It was a smaller room, simply furnished but still opulent in the same manner as the rest of the house. It had been some time since he had last seen Longbottom in person for longer than a fleeting moment. He had forgotten how short he was. But time had hardened him. In their early years Longbottom had been overweight and bucktoothed. Anxious as all hell. Generally lacking in confidence.

Draco had seen him grow into quite the opposite. He had leaned out, grown some muscle, lost the baby fat around his face that made him look younger than his years. Grown into his looks. Gained confidence, too, judging by the way he was staring daggers at him now. Draco had to give him some credit—he'd led a rebellion for this long—however meager—after Potter's demise. It had been doomed from the start, to be sure, but he'd given Draco plenty of trouble along the way. By now his little group of followers would have heard the news of his death. They would surely lose hope and disband. Draco wondered if any of the remaining would be stubborn enough to keep fighting—but without their precious leader, it was doubtful. Longbottom had the experience and knowledge of the case, without it they would crumble. If they chose to continue their fight, well... they would be easy to track down and dispose of.

Draco stared at Longbottom expectantly, not saying a word.

"I won't bow," Longbottom said brazenly.

It was so petty that Draco nearly laughed, but his ire took over.

"You will or Lovegood will suffer for it," Draco said, and waited.

The inner turmoil Longbottom was facing was a delicious sight to behold. Draco fed on it like it was honey. After half a minute, and with a look of the utmost loathing on his face, Longbottom bowed at last, bending at the waist so stiffly it was as though he were wood warping under a great weight.

"Good," Draco said, pleased. "See to it that you remember this: I am your Lord, you are my servant, and you will treat me with the deference that demands. The same applies to my wife. Any rebellious behavior will not only be rewarded with punishment to you but to Lovegood as well. Am I understood?"

Furious, Longbottom stared at him with a tightly clenched jaw until he could no longer continue the silence, threatening repercussion.

“Yes, my Lord.”

“His wand, my Lord,” Pansy said as she stepped forward, and gave it to Draco.

He surveyed it in his hands for a moment as he spoke.

“As much as it would please me to block your magic from you, that would render you useless in terms of helping Pansy. You may be my prisoner, but you must be useful. You’ll get it back, but it will need adjustments—in the meantime Pansy will train you in wandless magic.”

“I can manage wandless magic,” Longbottom said.

This time it took Pansy prodding Longbottom in the side with her elbow for him to attempt to soften his glare and add, “my Lord.”

“She’ll train you regardless,” Draco replied dismissively. “I expect perfection.”

“It will be done, my Lord,” Pansy said.

“Good. I’m sure Pansy already filled you in on the basics,” Draco said, “She tends to Lady Hermione. *You* will tend to *me*—not that I need it, but I don’t trust you with her yet.”

He clasped his hands behind his back and tilted his chin up as he regarded Longbottom, surveying him from head to toe.

“I won’t repeat the rest except for one: there is no way to escape. Not without my permission, and you’ll never have it. You are bound to *me* and to this house. You go where *I* want you to go. There is no way to make one last foolhardy attempt to save my wife—if she even wants it anymore, which I doubt. If you behave I’ll *consider* letting you visit Lovegood. Don’t look so puffed up—she’s fine. I’ve been far kinder to her than I have to you. But don’t get comfortable. Whether you die together or separately is in your hands.”

“And that’s it?” Longbottom asked. “We’re just here in your chains to be humiliated until you’ve had your fun and decide to kill us?”

“Was I not clear enough?” Draco sounded bored, but his irises were turning red, and it was slowly overtaking the sclera of his eyes. Neville noticed this, and his brows lowered and bent in horror.

“I let you live comfortably in your last days and you complain?” Draco hissed, stalking forward until he towered over Longbottom, his face crowding in. “I strung up Potter in my dungeon and tortured and bled him dry—would you rather choose that for yourself and Lovegood?”

“No,” Longbottom said, aghast. He couldn’t stop staring at the red horror of Malfoy’s gaze.

Draco loomed closer. He could see that Longbottom was fighting the urge to cringe away. The fear in his eyes was delicious.

“Then shut your mouth,” Draco said, his tone so cold that the other man had to repress a shiver. “And hold out your arm.”

Meanwhile, Hermione was in the library with Martin who, mostly unaware of the day’s events, was painting steadily away at his easel. With Lucio busy with his lessons, Martin worked off the reference sketches he had made, but at the present he had taken up the task of developing the background of the portrait.

Hermione had found him in the library after she and Draco had fucked against the wall in the foyer. They had been rather loud, and when she entered and saw Martin, couldn’t help her blush, wondering suddenly if he had heard, and how long he had been in the Manor. He had greeted her first, bowing, but made no sly remark or bore no knowing smile. Whether or not he’d heard the commotion, he made no reference to it, and occupied himself with his painting. It was at that moment that Hermione was struck with how much he reminded her of Harry. Her heart had constricted strangely at the realization. How had it taken her so long to notice that? Suddenly unable to look him in the eye, she had gone to the window, pretending to gaze outside at the grey sky as she grappled with her thoughts. The methodical strokes of his brushes against the canvas and the tinkling of the jar that held his turpentine soothed her.

“You seem nervous, my Lady,” he said after some time.

She looked away from the window sharply. “I am not.”

He inclined his head.

“I’m sorry. I should not have assumed anything.”

That flash of motion also reminded her of Harry—how he had a habit of ducking his head a little when scolded, as if used to things being thrown at him. She turned her head away from Martin.

Stop thinking of him, hissed that warped voice in her head. *He is nothing but dust now.*

As if she had done so purposefully. She could not help it.

Then came the unbidden memory of that dream she’d had while in her coma. How real it had felt. How passionately they’d moved together.

Stop, she hissed. *It was a dream and nothing more. Draco was using me in my sleep. That’s what I felt.*

“Today has been momentous for my husband,” she said, crossing her arms. “He’s captured an important enemy.”

“Then congratulations to him,” Martin said, though he sounded a bit uneasy. He had lowered his palette and brush. “Did it have anything to with that explosion I heard mentioned on the wireless? I suppose it’s too late in the day for the Prophet to include it in today’s issue.”

“Yes,” she said.

"I wasn't aware my Lord had any other enemies besides Harry Potter," Martin said, frowning.

"He's been telling people the truth about my and Draco's relationship... how it actually happened. Trying to get people to hold Draco accountable." Hermione uncrossed her arms. "You can understand why my husband wouldn't like that."

"I'd heard some rumors," Martin said, nodding. "Years ago. I remember people didn't really like talking about it, even if they thought it wasn't true. I can't imagine that being an easy task."

"It isn't," she replied. "That's how Draco got away with it for so long. Even when we were at school together and this was starting, I was too afraid and embarrassed to tell anyone. When I finally got myself to do it I couldn't because he had me under his control so that I couldn't ask anyone for help. I unwillingly enabled him to continue and worsen." She scoffed. "When the truth started coming out little by little, some people still didn't believe it. Not for a long time. By then, he was too powerful already, and it didn't matter."

Martin's eyes were sympathetic.

"I'm sorry, my Lady."

She said nothing for a moment and Martin resumed painting awkwardly, wondering if he had offended her but too nervous to ask.

"How many works are there left to be completed in this commission?" she asked some minutes later.

Martin, who had once again become engrossed in rendering fine details on his painting, started and looked up.

He could not see her, but heard her steps come to a stop some feet away, behind his canvas.

"Erm—I believe my Lord still expects two more paintings, my Lady."

He leaned away and to the side of the canvas and found her there, looking so serious it made him fumble his paintbrush—it fell to the floor with a clatter.

She appeared not to hear it or have noticed.

"Then you better work faster than you ever have in your life," she said, her voice soft.

He frowned—a little confused and hurt. She wanted him gone? He thought they'd formed a very tentative friendship by now. Or had Lord Malfoy grown displeased with him somehow and wanted him gone as soon as possible?

She saw his expression and came forward, pointing her wand down at the floor—his paintbrush levitated off the ground and into her hand. She pressed it back into his grip. He stood there numbly, gooseflesh erupting in waves over his skin as she came even closer, her hands bracing on his shoulders, leaning in to speak gently into his ear, as if afraid she would be overheard.

He went stiff in shock, her proximity like a current of lightning.

“Paint quickly, let him pay you, and go home. Forget any of this ever happened. Nothing good will come if you stay any longer than you must.”

“Why?” he breathed. His heart pounded with foreboding. It was like a cloud now that had enveloped them—that, and her scent, clouding his thoughts.

She came even closer, her head dipping to his throat. Her breasts brushed against his chest. Her lips brushed against his skin. Her gentle heat was so welcoming that he found himself going slack. He was sweating now, his heart hammering like a Beater’s club against a Quaffle.

“You’re already in his web,” she said softly. He could feel the gentle graze of her eyelashes on him like the stroke of a butterfly’s wing. His legs were so weak he feared he would wobble where he stood.

“I don’t want you to fall to him, too.”

He opened his mouth to reply but not quite knowing what to say, failed to speak. She had already pulled herself away, her composure as if nothing had just transpired. He stared at her, transfixed. Was that heat in her eyes real or imagined?

“I expect my husband will invite guests tonight to celebrate his victory. You’re welcome to join us for dinner, either way.”

“I will,” he found himself saying on instinct, so stupefied by that fleeting yet eternal contact, her lingering scent like a promise in the air around him, the press of her lips that was still heavy on his mind. “If it pleases you.”

She looked torn—as if she had expected him to decline but hadn’t wanted him to.

“It shouldn’t,” she replied, backing away and toward the door. “But it does.”

“My lady—”

It was too late. She had already left.

As Hermione and Martin had their strange conversation in the library, Theodore Nott had come to the manor to pay a visit, and was now in Draco’s study.

“Congratulations, my Lord,” Theo was saying, bowing his head, a huge grin upon his face. “I heard about Longbottom’s death.”

Draco snorted, standing at the window behind his desk. His arms were crossed over his broad chest, and he leaned against the sill.

“He lives yet. I had the Aurors fabricate his death, and now I have myself a new servant.”

Nott’s eyes were wide. He let out a loud, incredulous laugh. “Serves him right. Is he as miserable as I picture him?”

“Oh, he makes the saddest picture,” Draco replied with a snort. “He *loathes* himself for what he’s done, but not as much as he loathes me.”

“And what of Lovegood? Has she been of any use?”

“She’s resisted her interrogations ably,” Draco said. “But I wasn’t so much concerned with what she knew outside of Longbottom’s location. I was more interested in her use as bait, in which she served her purpose perfectly.”

“And what now?” Nott asked. “Shall he just feed you grapes until he withers and dies?”

“Tempting,” Draco said with a smirk. ‘But I have no wish for that long mopey face around my home long term. I only want to humiliate him as thoroughly as possible until he loses his entertainment value.’ There was a gleam in his eye. “Stay for dinner. I’ll invite others. Come witness my *greatest* opponent.” He gave a mocking laugh.

Nott scoffed. “Whoever deemed him the ‘greatest’?”

“An idiot. Longbottom was resourceful enough to last this long, that’s all. He has never been a real threat to me. *Potter* was more of a concern until I killed him.”

“And you’ve vanquished them both,” Nott said. “A testament to your strength, my Lord. I knew you would handle the situation easily. Nobody could hope to challenge you.”

Draco sat at his desk.

“I welcome them to try, regardless. It does get a little dull, not having a worthwhile opponent... Perhaps I should have waited to kill Potter. I was too hasty. But it’s a mistake I won’t make this time—when I decide to kill Longbottom and Lovegood, I’ll make sure it’s worth the waiting for.”

There was a gleam of excitement in Nott’s eye. “I will await the day eagerly, my Lord. How does Lady Malfoy bear the situation? They were good friends once, weren’t they?”

“She lost her affection for him,” Draco said, a gleam in his eye. “I made sure of that. She knows his true nature now, and he hers. There is no chance of their friendship rekindling.”

“Excellent,” Nott said. “I’m sure you’ll give him exactly what he deserves, my Lord.”

“I plan to,” Draco replied. ‘Every last bit of what he’s owed.’ He gave Nott a sharp, stern look. “You understand that Longbottom’s presence here remains a secret between you and I. The Ministry will ask no questions, and I will not tolerate loose lips in my circle.”

“Of course, my Lord. I’ll tell no one... will you give him a new name, then?”

“I suppose I’ll have to,” Draco said, amused, as if he hadn’t given it much thought yet. “Whatever name I give him now can’t be much worse than what he was given at birth, I suppose.”

Nott barked with laughter.

Pansy had just left Longbottom in his quarters to rest (as if he would be able to relax at all), and was walking down the hall to the nursery to check on Lucio when she felt the summons.

She Apparated to Draco's location at once, knocked on the door of his study, and when it opened she entered. She bowed in greeting, and upon rising took notice of Nott.

"Yes, my Lord?" she asked.

Draco was in high spirits still. He stood.

"I've decided to host a small dinner for friends tonight," he said. "Make the necessary arrangements. I believe there's enough time to get it done."

"Of course. How many will attend?"

"All my faithful," Draco said. "Unless they've got other occasions to attend to." And then he laughed.

Nott joined in, and Pansy remembered to smile.

"Who would refuse?" Nott asked, grinning. "They'll have heard the news by now. Our Lord's victory *must* be celebrated."

"Let Hermione know as well, Pansy," Draco said. There was a smile on his lips, a gleam in his eye. "Help her prepare once the arrangements have been put into order."

Pansy bowed, unsettled.

"Right away, my Lord."

Hermione hardly reacted when Pansy broke the news. In fact, she seemed almost as if she had expected this very outcome.

"Of course he would take the first chance to show off and swagger on about his victory," she said with a tense smile. "How big of a dinner will it be?"

"As big as the last, I'm afraid," Pansy said, wincing. "He's invited all of them."

Hermione sighed and rubbed at her temples.

"Fine." She opened her eyes and peeked at Pansy a little sheepishly. "I had a feeling this would happen anyway—I invited Martin to come for dinner."

Whether Pansy suspected anything, she didn't let on. She merely nodded and smiled.

"Then you will have another friend in attendance," Pansy said, patting her arm gently. "I'm sure my Lord will be happy to see him."

Hermione didn't quite know what to suspect for Draco's reaction. Perhaps he had included Martin in that list of attendees. Perhaps not. He had a funny sort of regard for the artist, and Hermione thought he might be pleased that Martin had scrounged up the courage to participate. Or he might sense Hermione's growing attraction to him. He might seek retaliation.

Hermione squared her shoulders. She would not allow herself to become uneasy. She was tired of Draco running her life. Now that the ring was out of the picture (for now), she would wield her power again like a whip.

It's our turn, said the warped voice, and Hermione agreed.

All she knew was that if she was going to have to spend an unbearably celebratory night with all of Draco's followers, then she had to make it worthwhile for herself lest she go mad.

"Hopefully the night will move quickly. He didn't elaborate and this is rather last minute, so I don't think he has any nasty surprises this time," Pansy said.

Hermione shook her head.

"You speak too soon. He always has some dark whimsy waiting for an impulse on his part to make happen." But she took Pansy's hand and squeezed it. "The night will pass as they always must, and we'll live through it. Where is Lucio?"

"In the nursery, working on his assignments," Pansy said. "He knows something's afoot. He's a little upset he hasn't been told, or that he hasn't seen you or his father all day."

Guiltily, Hermione straightened and went to the door at once. "So much has happened today already, I forgot to check in on him!"

Pansy followed her quickly.

"No one can blame you for that," she said. "So much is about to change—it's in the air. Can you feel it?"

Hermione was still rushing ahead but she turned and caught Pansy's eye to acknowledge her question. She was moving so swiftly that her hair, all loose and undone, flowed behind her like a stream and some of it swept across her face but her expression was grave and solemn.

I can, her eyes said.

The journey to the nursery was quick. Hermione all but slammed the door open, which gave Lucio a fright. He jolted from where he'd been stationed at his desk which was too big for him. It was layered with books and parchment. Most children his age would have doodled or scribbled nonsense all over the margins and scraps, but Lucio rarely did. His handwriting, although still bearing some traces of his youth, was remarkably fine, and his notes, dictated by his tutors, were detailed and careful.

Hermione glanced at them from the corner of her eye. Unbidden, a memory of Ron's scrawled notes and hasty drawings came to her. There was a small twinge in her heart. She chased the picture away and then opened her arms to Lucio, who careened straight into them and pressed his sweet little face to her belly.

Pansy lingered in the doorway, watching as Hermione knelt down to match Lucio's height.

"Mummy!" He peppered her face with kisses, both relieved and overjoyed to see her.

"Darling," she said, lifting him into her arms. "I meant to visit you sooner, I'm sorry. Were you worried?"

"Pansy told me I couldn't leave my room all morning," Lucio said, his tone almost reproachful.

"It was your father's order, my love," Hermione replied, brushing a lock of hair from his eye. "Don't be cross with her."

"But why couldn't I go outside?"

"Well—" she wasn't quite sure where to start. "Something bad happened in Knockturn Alley and your father and I had to rush there to deal with it."

His blue eyes were wide.

"What happened?"

Hermione didn't want to lie.

"There were explosions," she said carefully. "Quite a few people died."

"How many?"

"I don't know the total," she admitted.

"Who did it?" he demanded.

Hermione only hesitated for a fraction of a second.

"Someone your father and I once knew."

Lucio was hanging on her every word. His hands clasped together behind her neck.

"Your father and I had to go there to talk to him, and your father took him as prisoner. He is going to live with us and work with Pansy."

"*Here?* You knew him?" Lucio asked at once. "Do *I* know him?"

"No, my love," Hermione said. She stood, took his hand. "But it's time you did."

Neville had ignored Pansy's suggestion to get some rest entirely and had spent the past hour or so inspecting every inch of his new quarters for any chance at escape. As he had been warned, he found none. He had even tried to blast the door and the window down with magic—nothing had happened.

He might have anticipated that. Malfoy wasn't stupid enough to allow him even a shred of power. The very moment he had regained his awareness in this place he had felt something hideously familiar—something he had been unlucky enough to feel twice before.

That presence...

The atmosphere here was thick, bleak, uncomfortable. It had made his skin crawl and he felt on edge constantly. Like there was an undercurrent of malevolence in the very air itself, dragging itself into his lungs with every intake of air. Like there were eyes embedded into the walls of the house, watching his every step. It was maddening.

It was exactly the same as how it had felt the only time they had been able to track down *and* infiltrate Malfoy's home—the first one, that is, in which he had held Hermione. The second time had been after Malfoy had kidnapped him and cut off his ear, then held him in

the dungeon. Every inch of the place was drenched in spells and enchantments for concealment and containment. They hung so heavy in the air that it made him feel as though he were walking through an invisible current. It was incredible—and disturbing.

He had been inside such places before—he pictured Hogwarts and then Grimauld Place instantly. All four of these places were warded heavily with magic meant to protect those inside—except only one out of that lot held those protections with ill intent. It had warped that magic. It suffused itself into the very fibers of what made up the place. It weighed upon the psyche like a blanket meant to smother.

And Hermione had been dragged from place to place just like this, living in these conditions for years. How many times had she managed to escape and then been hauled back? And how many new spells had been added afterwards in Draco's vain attempts to trap her within?

Malfoy might boast an elegant, luxurious home. He might clothe Hermione in the finest frocks and feed her the best foods, but all the luxury and comfort in the world could never be a true distraction from this constant, malevolent presence. *And* his insanity.

How had she not gone mad already?

When his attempts at escape proved futile he sat down by the window and let himself rest, but not sleep. He had not slept properly for some time, especially since Luna's capture, but much less since he had made up his mind to do what he'd done in Knockturn Alley.

And he was likely to get less sleep now, with the images of the carnage he had wrought burned like a brand into his mind.

A brand for a brand, he thought, staring down at the Malfoy crest on his skin.

It was arrogant of him to complain after what he had just done. He had known the risks, and he'd done it anyway. Neville wished he could argue that he had not been of sound mind when he had done it, but it was simply not true.

There had been more blood than he'd expected. He'd forgotten the efficiency of magic in this sort of scenario. An Avada left no mess behind but a cold corpse. No gore. No blood.

The Muggle way was much more violent. He hadn't wanted to use the bomb in the first place. But it was the fastest way to draw attention, with something untraceable by magic. Malfoy had put so many restrictions upon entering Knockturn and Diagon Alley of late that he'd had to smuggle the components through bit by bit, heavily under disguise each time, until it was finally time to assemble.

He had not really let himself think of the lives he would take during the process. All he could think of was Luna and what hideous torture she might be going through under Malfoy's hand. Hermione had told them the fate that had almost fallen on Danielle. Would Malfoy cast the same fate on Luna, too?

The haunting thoughts refused to leave him, haranguing him even in his sleep. He couldn't rest knowing what potential harm awaited her under Malfoy's hand. There was no time to try and sniff out Malfoy again, no time to try and broker a deal. Malfoy was out for more than blood at this point.

And so when he had assembled everything, gone a safe distance from the site and taken out the remote trigger, he hadn't hesitated.

Now the images of the rubble and the limbs and bodies flung about would stay with him forever.

An Avada would have been cleaner. You should have turned your wand on yourself instead.

He nodded. It would have denied Malfoy the satisfaction of taking him home like some sort of broken up trophy.

But it would have done nothing to save Luna.

The door opened then, startling him—he stood at once, his fists automatically clenching, expecting to see Malfoy again.

What could he want now?

Pansy Parkinson was at the door instead, to his relief. She gave him a meaningful look—a warning? Neville still wasn't sure what to make of her. Then she stepped aside.

Hermione was behind her and stepped into the room.

He opened his mouth, wanting to speak but not knowing what to say. He knew he ought to bow, considering the titles Malfoy had bestowed upon themselves, but it was too strange. Seeing her now, stately and beautiful and *haunted*, brought a lump to her throat. Every time he had seen her since her kidnapping there had been such a weighted tension in her shoulders that made him wonder when it would snap. He thought of who she had been once, when they had both been free, and grieved.

They were staring at him. He tried to utter a word but nothing came, for he had finally caught sight of the boy who held Hermione's hand and was staring up at him with open curiosity.

Neville felt a muscle in his jaw draw tight. The boy was a perfect vision of what Malfoy had looked like as a child.

It was so jarring, in fact, that Neville found himself with the urge to lunge forward and wrap his hands around the little monster's neck, squeeze the life from him. But he was rooted to the ground and not by his own choice—someone else's magic held him solidly. Parkinson's, probably.

Stop, he told himself, trying to tamp down that rage that had risen in him so quickly. *Look again.*

The boy's hair was curly like Hermione's. In every other physical aspect he appeared exactly like his father, but Neville watched him for a moment, frowning.

The boy was watching him too, tilting his head. His chin was pointed like Draco's but glowing with youth and still round in the cheeks, and while his eye color was as light as his father's the expression within them and the set of his mouth was undoubtedly the influence of his mother. He even had a widow's peak just like hers.

Neville felt his heart constrict. There was a lump in his throat. It was suddenly blurry everywhere he looked.

"Neville," Hermione began. Her voice sounded so distant, but he could still sense the sadness in her tone. She had observed his reaction carefully. "This is my son, Lucio."

She looked down to the boy. "Darling, this is Neville. We went to school together. He was my friend."

The was took a moment to register. It hurt. But he could not argue.

Neville managed to swallow, clear his throat. There were tears in his eyes and he did not care to hide them.

"Lucio..." he said, a slight frown creasing his brow.

"His father picked the name," Hermione said.

That explained *that*.

"I'm glad to meet you at last," Neville finally said to the child, though he felt the opposite.

The boy stared up at him, his eyes not shy but guarded. He opened his mouth to speak, but someone else did before he could.

"You've anticipated me, sweetling," came Malfoy's voice from the door.

Hermione's head whipped to the side to look at him. Her hands went to the boy's shoulders in a protective gesture—one that did not go unnoticed by Neville.

"You're not angry, are you?" Hermione asked. She did not sound afraid or nervous. "They were going to meet one way or another."

"No, my love, I'm not angry," Malfoy said as he strode into the room. Neville eyed him warily. Malfoy stared right back, eyes intent, hungrily searching his expression. He sought pain, and he found it in the tightness around Neville's eyes and mouth—and grinned.

"Well, Longbottom?" he asked. "What do you think of my progeny so far?"

So far? Before he could stop himself, Neville's head turned automatically to Hermione, glancing down at her stomach. Had he missed something? But his eyes raised, met hers. She calmly gave a small shake of her head. Relieved, Neville looked back at Malfoy.

He's nothing like you, Neville wanted to say. He's got your face but that's his mother's essence in his eyes, and I can tell that just by looking.

But he kept that back. It was both a compliment and an insult, because surely Malfoy would want his son to grow into something as twisted and heartless as himself.

Hermione probably wouldn't mind if I said it, actually.

The boy was still staring at him. Despite his guarded demeanor there was still such an inquisitive, clever air about him that Neville couldn't help but like him, and the boy had not said one word to him yet.

He is not his father, Hermione had insisted not long ago. Neville could see that, and then felt trepidation. Malfoy must know that, too. Neville wondered what their father-son relationship was like. Lucius Malfoy's face swam in his mind's eye—he had been rumored to be a cold, exacting figure.

In the end, he carefully said, "He looks just like you, my Lord. It's like I'm looking into the past."

It was physically painful to speak so respectfully to the person he hated most in the world. It left a bitter taste on his tongue and he wanted to spit, wanted to wash his mouth clean of it, but knew that was not an option—not if he wanted Luna to remain unharmed.

His caution pleased Malfoy. The Dark Lord bent, scooped his son up, propped him on one shoulder.

"He does, doesn't he?" he asked. "Can you imagine if we had a girl next? She would be as stunning as her mother."

Hermione looked away, her jaw tight.

"Well," Malfoy said brightly, 'now that we're all here in one room: I'm expecting company tonight.' He looked at Neville. "You will be serving them along with Pansy."

"Yes, my Lord," Pansy said.

Neville was clearly taken aback, frowning.

"I've had no training," he said, and then begrudgingly added, "My Lord."

Malfoy waved a dismissive hand, scoffing. "You don't need training to serve wine and show people into the room. Simply see to it that you don't shame me with any blunders. Pansy will be with you, simply follow her lead."

He turned to Hermione. "I've run a bath for you, sweetheart." He held out his free arm for her to take. "Pansy, you'll escort Lucio to the nursery?"

"Can I come to the party, Father?" Lucio asked as Lord Malfoy set him down carefully onto his feet.

"Of course," Malfoy said before Hermione could reply. "But not for the whole night."

Neville saw a flash of displeasure in Hermione's eyes.

Pleased, Lucio smiled. "Thank you, father."

Pansy and Lucio left the room, hand in hand. Lord Malfoy had stayed back, Hermione's arm still tucked in his, and he watched Neville.

"It won't do to have a dead man discovered inside my home, loyal followers or not," he said. "When you are in general company outside of those who live here, you will forget your name, and you will be disguised. You will be known as John."

Neville stared coldly at him, and before he could hold his tongue he spoke.

"I would have thought you would have wanted to flaunt my being here, my Lord," he said. "Was that not the point of this event?"

The Dark Lord only smiled broadly, taking no offense.

“It’s enough for me that only a select few know,” he said. “It’s better for the world to believe Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood are deceased, isn’t it? You wouldn’t want attention on yourself after what you’ve just done, I’m sure.”

Neville didn’t reply. Malfoy chuckled.

“Under your new identity, your past doesn’t matter, so you have no surname. If anybody asks, give them the blank stare you’re giving me now. Just like that—perfect. They’ll assume I’ve Obliviated you.”

Neville’s expression was blank—not with confusion or stupidity but a feral rage that indicated he was one fraying thread away from lunging at Lord Malfoy.

Malfoy stared back, undaunted. Neither moved.

“Is there something the matter, John?” he asked pointedly.

There was a pause.

“No, my Lord,” Neville—*John*—finally responded.

“Excellent,” Malfoy said curtly. “Now get some rest. You look like you desperately need it. You’ll be called for when you’re needed. Pansy will make sure you’re disguised for the event.”

He pulled Hermione from the room, and the door shut behind them.

Neville remained standing there for several minutes, his rage cresting and receding in him like a churning ocean, not knowing what to do.

There was a knock on Neville’s door, waking him suddenly. He sat up from the armchair with a jerky movement, his heart suddenly hammering.

“It’s only me,” came Pansy’s voice from the door.

He scrubbed his face, rested his elbows on his thighs for a moment.

“I’m coming in.”

So much for that. Of course they would not allow him that tiny breath of rebellion.

The door opened and she entered, closed the door behind her.

Neither said anything for a moment.

“I’m sorry you ended up here,” she said softly. And then, softer still—

“I’m sorry *all* of us ended up here.”

Not what he’d expected her to say. He glanced at her warily. Her face was still a blank mask, revealing nothing. Even her eyes were neutral.

“You might think me a villain for working for him. Supporting him, in a sense.”

Neville snorted.

“There’s no *might* about it, Parkinson.”

“Well let me explain and then you can make your judgement,” she said, still polite, still patient. There was no condescension in her tone whatsoever but it still annoyed Neville. “I don’t necessarily need your good opinion, but I don’t want you to think I’m on Draco’s side. What I care about—” she lowered her voice to less than a whisper.

“I didn’t know what I was getting into when I answered Draco’s offer to work for him. I’d thought he and Hermione were in love, and eloped, even though it seemed so wild an idea back in Hogwarts. I wasn’t told the truth until after it was too late.”

Neville only stared. He still didn’t trust her, and she didn’t expect him to.

“I have a duty to Lord Malfoy and Lady Malfoy,” she said. “And I cannot break it.”

And now her voice dropped even lower, so that now he had to lean in and strain his ears to hear.

“But my loyalty is with only one of them, and yours does too, I think.”

And she flinched, as if expecting or receiving pain that he could not see. There was a tense second where they stared at each other, but whatever she had feared had not come, and she sighed shakily.

“It’s not as if I can leave freely,” she continued. “Not easily, anyway. I cannot dissent against my master, and I can’t prevent him from anything he decides to do. I can only watch, and help my Lady in any way that I can within the limits of my vow.”

“I’m sure she’s grateful for your company,” Neville said coolly.

Pansy lifted her chin and her tone grew sharp.

“Don’t pretend to know her feelings. You haven’t been here or seen what she’s been through. You let her down. *All* of you. From Potter to you. I’ve watched her heart break so many times over the years as she kept having to face the truth that none of you could help her, and that she couldn’t help herself.”

“We tried—”

“We’ve *all* tried,” Pansy cut in. ‘And it’s never enough. I’ve come to terms with that. The best thing I can do now is continue to help my Lady in any way I can. And you are *not* going to jeopardize anything. You pulled your ridiculous stunt in Knockturn Alley to get everyone’s attention. Look where you are now.’ She paused, shook her head. “I thought you had more sense than that, than to walk right into his hands.”

“You’re not the only one who’s come to terms with it,” Neville said heatedly. “He had me in a corner, and there was no way out of it. So don’t you judge me, Parkinson.”

Her careful façade was slowly morphing into a glare.

“He’s going to test you every way he can to break you,” she said. “He did it with me, and he did it with George, and he’ll do it with you. You better be on your guard, because he’ll jump on any excuse you give him to punish you.”

She faltered.

"My Lady is in enough pain," she said. "I would warn you not to add to it, but you already are just by being here."

"She's different," Neville said. "I've noticed it more and more in the few times I've seen her. She told me she had to give in to him but that can't be all. What's he done to her?"

Here Pansy gave him a strange look.

"My Lady does what she must to ensure peace."

Neville frowned.

"What?"

"Get up," Pansy said, motioning with her hand. "I've got to disguise you before we go downstairs."

He did, and she approached with her hand aloft, already muttering spells. Neville felt his features shifting. He might have dozed off but still felt exhausted. He wondered where Hermione was at that moment, if she was with her son.

"Wait," he said, and she broke off mid-spell, distracted. "Did you say *George* earlier?"

Her lips were in a grim line.

"You can't mean George Weasley."

"He is here," she said. "And he also works for Lord Malfoy."

Neville blinked. He had gone pale.

"How?" he croaked.

"He should tell you himself," Pansy said, resuming her work. "It was a terrible shock to my Lady, too. But you're not to speak to him tonight on order of Lord Malfoy. He doesn't want you drawing attention to yourself by accosting him. You can speak to him tomorrow if you wish."

"He'll be here tonight, then."

"Yes. But like I said—do not approach him."

She'd finished her spellwork and led him to a tall mirror in the corner to look at himself. Neville was too concerned with this news of George Weasley to really take in his new appearance. He didn't recognize himself and that was all that mattered, wasn't it?

"Change into those," Pansy said, pointing to a new set of robes that had appeared on his bed. "I'll turn my back if you're shy. But do it quick."

He changed, wired with apprehension and anger.

When he finished and let her know she turned, her hands on her hips, and surveyed him quickly.

"Good."

She went to the door and beckoned for him to follow.

When he met her there she hesitated, then leaned in.

“It will be difficult,” she said. “Don’t give him anything. Keep it all inside and don’t let your face move except to speak. And when you’re about to break, remember who you’re doing this for.”

23. The Welcoming Party (part II)

The guests were already arriving and were in the process of being escorted into the large dining hall by Pansy and John/Neville, the sudden new addition to the Malfoy manor staff. He was unremarkable looking to the point of invisibility, which worked exactly as Draco had wanted. Nobody gave him more than a passing glance except for Theodore Nott, who eyed him slyly as he was led into the manor. There was an overly long table assembled in the dining hall, and on it were priceless groups of dinnerware. Candles hovered high in the air above their heads, and a smallish orchestra on the opposite side of the great room were gathered in their chairs, blindfolded and quietly preparing their instruments. The singular wide golden throne sat prominently on the dais, unoccupied yet but still intimidating in its emptiness. There was loud chatter and laughter as the guests took their seats and mingled, taking off their black and gold-detailed masks.

Draco and Hermione were still in the bedroom. She had just helped him into his robes—the very ones he'd worn at the last gathering, in fact. She had dreaded that he would have another awful, ostentatious dress for her as he had done last time, but he surprised her by pulling out her emerald silk gown, his favorite, out of the closet.

“No shoes,” he announced. “Not tonight.”

She eyed him skeptically.

“Really?”

He had already magicked away her current clothing, leaving her nude. He knelt at her feet and held the gown open for her to step into.

“It’s funny,” he remarked as she braced herself on his shoulder and began to step into the dress. “I’ve bought you a considerable number of things to wear throughout our marriage and enjoyed them all—but none of it compares to how you look in this.”

He rose slowly, sliding it up her hips, pressing kisses to her mound and then her belly as he came up. The silk encased her lovingly.

“It always drives me wild,” he murmured. Now she pushed her arms through the straps and he pressed a kiss between her breasts, then on the hollow of her throat. He circled around her to clasp the gown shut from behind, his touch soft and reverent.

“You look like a goddess incarnate,” he whispered into her ear from behind, pressing against her, sharing his heat. Hermione let her head rest against his shoulder. “Divinity caged within flesh.”

“Do you mean to flatter me or yourself when you speak like this?” she asked. He had wrapped his arms around her tightly. His nose trailed along her throat.

He grinned.

“Both.”

He let her go, turned her to face him. Pulled her in by the waist to crush his lips to hers. Hermione gave in and kissed him back—better for everyone that he maintain his elevated mood throughout the night. She let her tongue tease his, and when he slipped his hands into the deep plunge of her neckline to cup her breasts she gasped but it came out sounding like a giggle—even better, she supposed.

He groaned.

“Are you trying to delay me?” he asked, his thumbs gently flicking her nipples, prompting them to harden.

“Why would I do that, my Lord?” she asked innocently.

Draco bit his lip, gave her a scorching look.

“Maybe you just want me all to yourself tonight.”

She only smiled. “I believe we’re due downstairs, my Lord.”

His hands slipped from underneath her dress and came up to hold her face. Hermione felt magic around her head and looked at him questioningly, then at her reflection in the mirror on the dresser behind him.

He had given her a delicate golden circlet to wear, bearing golden laurel leaves.

Hermione barely restrained her gasp of dismay.

He had given himself one as well, though his was larger and heavier in appearance.

She felt that tickle of magic again on her arms and looked down, saw that he’d added golden bands around her upper arms, too, and long, beautifully engraved bracers on her forearms.

His emerald choker was already heavy against her throat. She’d thought he would’ve been satisfied with that, but apparently not, because he took that off her manually and then conjured a delicate choker adorned with thorns to circle her throat.

Hermione took a deep breath and realized belatedly how tense her shoulders were. She made them drop slowly. Her back felt stiff.

“My Lord,” she said, unsure of what to say. “This is to—”

“Tonight will be a celebration,” Draco said, taking her hands in his. He raised them to his lips and kissed their backs. “This is a victory for you as much as it is for me. Remember that.”

She hesitated. Nodded.

You know best, husband, she thought to herself, her tone mocking.

“I will, my Lord.”

“I know you’ll behave perfectly,” he continued. “You did so well last time. Now you can let go. I want you to enjoy yourself. Can you do that for me?”

Hermione stared at him for a fraction too long, gauging the excitement in his eyes.

“Of course.”

He smiled, his pale eyes dancing with affection.

"I love you," he said, stroking her cheek. "My sweet Persephone."

The feast was fabulously decadent. Dishes of every kind were offered and the richest wines were savored. With all of Draco's most loyal followers in attendance, the rarely-used dining hall was quite at capacity. Voices filled the air, bodies filled the room, all seated around the lavishly set table. Candles burned, hovering in the air, creating a intimate atmosphere.

Draco and Hermione sat together at the helm of the table. Lucio had been with them the whole first hour of the feast and he had been quite beside himself with excitement, facing Draco's followers' reverential treatment of him with amused confusion.

Lucio had attended precious few of Draco's gatherings since his birth, thanks to Hermione's protection. Many of Draco's followers had not seen him in a number of years and so when they saw him they could not help but delight in his presence and compared his looks between his parents. They kissed his little hands and promised him gifts, offered to introduce him to their daughters if they had any—anything to flatter his parents.

Draco had smiled proudly, watching it all. Hermione bore it with a tight smile of her own, watching her son closely and never letting him leave her side for fear of him becoming overwhelmed. To his credit, Lucio was much too overjoyed to merely be a part of his father's doings that he was not much unsettled by the strangers in his home. It was all quite the grown-up affair and it made him feel important. He was delighted in the attention and ate happily, seated between his mother and father. He even asked Hermione if his new friends would be in attendance, to which she'd had to say no—he was the only child present that evening, and his bedtime was coming up.

Thanks to Lucio's presence there had been a silent agreement (signaled by Draco's stern glance around the room and then at his son when the wine came out) that everyone would be on their best behavior until he was taken to bed. When Pansy finally came forward to announce it was time, the guests bid goodnight to the little princeling, and that they hoped to see him again soon. Lucio kissed his mother and father goodnight and followed Pansy from the room, too stuffed with food to protest that he was not tired.

Once the door had closed behind them, there was a noticeable shift in deportment. Everyone spoke more loudly, and the drink began to flow with an alarming frequency. Draco sprawled elegantly in his chair a little and beckoned with his finger. Hermione's chair glided to him, delivering her closer so they now sat without a gap between themselves.

Hermione ate a little but Draco indulged, mostly with drink. Each time he took a drink he would hold his goblet to her lips first. Hermione had resisted a little the first instance but he pressed it firmly against her lips until she relented and drank. Hermione only took sips at a time, enough to please him, but when he drank he took deep swallows, and he was summoning Neville forth to refill his cup constantly. He had never smiled so much in one night. It was bizarre to see, Hermione thought.

Hermione did not drink often if she could help it normally—but by the fifth time it happened during that dinner her head was swimming quite a bit and she felt a headache

forming. She motioned to Pansy, requested water, and drank deep when it arrived.

The others were having a wonderful time, apparently, eating and conversing with pleasure, and every few minutes there was another toast raised to the Lord and Lady Malfoy. There were so many that it became annoying and dull, but Hermione didn't dare show that. Draco would grin and they would raise their goblets again. His arm seemed permanently wrapped around her waist. Hermione wished he would remove it. Her chair was uncomfortable and she was growing hot.

George sat to Draco's right and said little, but he joined in with every toast dutifully and banged on the table with everyone else when Draco leaned down to kiss his wife. He caught her eye once, trying to gauge her expression. Hermione had kept her face blank but offered him a bland smile, suspicious that Draco was watching her through her old friend when she was not looking.

Astoria Greengrass and her sister Daphne had complimented Hermione's attire and had extended an invitation to visit them at any time—an offer Hermione was not inclined to accept at any time. Nott, visibly struck by her appearance, had bowed deeply and kissed her hand, congratulated her on her husband's victory (which made her grind her teeth behind her coy smile). Martin had bowed to her and Draco cautiously, dressed in his finest attire—a set of deep blue robes that complimented his eyes and hair.

If Draco had been surprised by his arrival he had not showed it—instead he seemed quite pleased that he had shown up. MacNair and Crabbe sat together, roaring with laughter over a raunchy joke somebody else had just shared. Bellatrix Lestrange was again, notably absent.

Martin now sat toward the end of the table, making small talk with the lady beside him. He was sipping at his goblet and seemed a little uncomfortable, but not afraid, at least. Hermione watched him throughout the evening as discreetly as she could, hoping Draco was too far in his cups to notice.

John/Neville and Pansy stood together near the table, behind the guests. They brought in more drink when requested, tidied up spills, took away plates. The orchestra in the background was playing but Hermione was rapidly growing drunk, barely paying attention to the music. She had not given them much attention until now when she caught sight of them and frowned, unsettled by their appearance.

Why are they blindfolded? She asked Draco through their bond. *What have you done?*

That is not my design but theirs, he replied. *I wouldn't protest if they took the silly things off—but you can't deny that it lends to the atmosphere.*

Hermione could not stop staring. Even the conductor was blindfolded. She could not make sense of it and burned with the desire to go over and ask why. How could they play if they couldn't see the sheet music or even see their conductor? Why was he even needed? She looked more closely—there was no sheet music to be seen anywhere.

They moved as though they could see perfectly, assembling their group and unpacking their instruments with not a single fumble between them. In fact, they moved and played so gracefully that Hermione couldn't help but suspect that there were slits in their blindfolds to allow them to see. It was one of the more bizarre things Hermione had ever seen.

Hermione tried watching Neville too whenever she could spare a glance. His face had been pale all night but she didn't know if it was from repressed anger or fear. To be surrounded by his enemies and powerless to do anything... it must have been taxing on him. She wanted to speak with him alone but knew there would be no chance until the party was over. And Draco would likely not allow it.

"A stunning victory," Crabbe said suddenly, standing and raising his goblet. Everyone followed suit once more. "To Lord Malfoy—may you have a long and glorious reign!"

There was more obnoxious pounding of the tabletop.

"Hear, hear!"

Everyone drank.

Draco raised his goblet to Hermione's lips.

I don't want any more, she said, fighting to keep her tone light. *If I have any more I'll fall over, Draco.*

Drink, he ordered. *I'll catch you and keep you in my lap for the rest of the night if you fall. But I know you can take it.*

Hermione wanted to shake her head—she'd had too much already. But he was insistent, pressing it against her mouth. She drank unhappily, the floor feeling unsteady beneath her. She was glad she was seated and not standing. When she finished she looked up—the others were watching. She made herself smile. They smiled back. Draco's hand stroked her back once, and then he rose.

A hush fell over the table at once. Even the orchestra had stopped playing.

"Peaceful times are in store for us," Draco began, his voice clear and strong, washing over the room. "With all our enemies vanquished, we have a great chance to create the society of our design. We will control the narrative. By the grace of your continued support, I will guide the future of the wizarding world. There is nothing to hold us back now."

Nott pounded his palms onto the table, so hard that his plate clattered.

"Hear, hear!"

"Your faith in me has led us to these heights," Draco said, looking steadily around the table, meeting every pair of eyes he came across. "It has not been unnoticed, and will be rewarded for your loyalty."

Somebody made a gesture with their goblet, demanding a refill. Pansy went forth dutifully, the pitcher of wine held tightly in her hands.

Draco looked every inch of him the regal king looking over his subjects. The golden circlet gleamed brightly in his hair, and in the soft haze of the candlelight it gave the effect of a halo around his head—Hermione frowned, wondering if she appeared to have one as well.

"My new school will be completed within the year. The coming generations will be taught the *right* way, and we will move to advance our society rather than stay in this antiquated folly as we have for so long. We can't allow the Muggles to surpass us. It's time to adapt and

improve. If we must incorporate Muggle technologies into our world to aid our growth, then it will be so.”

Everyone hung on his words, looking up at him in awe. Despite the amount of drink he’d had, he didn’t slur a single word nor did he wobble on his feet.

“In time, and with a lot of work, our society will become the strongest it’s ever been—a *new* world. We will always be remembered as its founders. And when we reveal ourselves to the Muggles, we will be powerful enough to take our rightful place: as their rulers.”

There was a stunned beat in which his words processed. Then: a loud scraping of chairs as everyone stood and raised their goblets or clapped their approval.

It would not do for the Dark Lord’s wife to remain seated. Hermione made herself stand, her head spinning. She stumbled on the leg of her chair but it worked on her favor because it made her fall into Draco. She wrapped her arms around him, appearing every bit the supportive and excited wife. He was more than pleased—he held her tight to him, tipped up her chin and kissed her soundly.

When they broke apart the others were still cheering, some even stamping their feet on the ground, making the floor rumble. George, seated close to them, was clapping. Hermione caught Neville’s eye—he had gone ashen. Pansy had the sense to keep her face blank. She could not see Martin through all the din.

“Let there be dancing,” Draco ordered, gesturing to the open floor. “Enjoy yourselves. This is a momentous occasion. Do not hold back. You are in your Lord’s house, and your Lord demands celebration.”

“And,” he said more loudly, “let there be music!”

It began at once, the blindfolded musicians behind them taking up their instruments instantly. Hermione wanted to twist around to see them better but couldn’t with how tightly Draco held her. There was no detectable flaw in their music, and as it washed over them it was heavy and beautiful. Their guests were already parting from the table and pairing up, heading onto the dance floor. Bit by bit, the table began to clear up by itself.

“Dance with me,” Draco was saying. His hands were tight around her hips and he led her to the open space behind the table, sweeping her into his arms with enough momentum that her skirts swirled around her in a wide circle. She wore nothing underneath at his order and almost let him go to push her skirt back down, but it had not gone up high enough to expose her to anybody. Hermione swatted him on the shoulder peevishly, subtly, knowing his intent. He only smirked in return and grasped her hand and then her waist.

Applause rang out as they danced. Draco led her proudly, his eyes never leaving hers. His hands were firm around her and she kept up with him fluidly despite the pounding in her head. Any time they danced, she was unable to push away the memories of the first time they had ever danced together, and she had been terrified and unwilling.

“How do you feel?” he asked.

“Quite drunk,” she admitted, annoyed. She still felt unsteady but not like falling—yet. He moved deliberately enough so that she only had to hold on to him and follow. He swept her

into a twirl that wrung applause from the watching crowd, and when she came back into his arms she appeared more resolute.

He laughed, charmed.

“That was my aim,” he said. “It’s a faster method to make you relax instead of using magic.”

She had suspected as much. But he had gone overboard.

And then, through the bond, he added:

You’ve always been so serious, my love.

Can you blame me? She shot back.

No, I suppose not.

It was hard not to trip over his feet as they danced—the rest of the room had turned into a blur around her. Hermione closed her eyes, felt him press her closer, his lips graze her bare shoulder.

“Capturing him won’t solve anything until he’s dead, you know,” she said. “Keeping him alive just to play with him a little before killing him is unnecessary.”

“He earned that for himself,” Draco said flippantly. “If he had merely given up long ago I wouldn’t have hesitated to kill him and Lovegood on sight. His own arrogance cost them both the dignity of a quick death.”

“And then what?” she challenged, her eyes flashing. “We live happily ever after? After you create this ‘new world’ of yours?”

Draco chuckled, his hands tightening around her. “Is that so unbelievable to you?”

By now the dance floor was packed and bustling with movement; the music pounded in her head. Hermione tried to soothe herself by watching the dancing couples. Draco pulled her closer, bent his head to murmur into her ear. She recoiled as though he were a fly buzzing around her head on instinct, and then stopped herself.

“Happy endings aren’t all cut out the same,” he was saying. “Perhaps for us, it only means that we’ve rid ourselves of our pasts to meet a beautiful new future. No more ghosts. No more pain.”

“I never wanted immortality.” She gave him a hard stare. “And there will *always* be ghosts. Always.”

He sighed. “What’s been done can’t be undone, firebird.”

There was a pause as he contemplated something.

“Would you want to teach at my school?” he asked.

Taken aback, Hermione stared at him.

“You’re serious,” she said, inspecting his expression.

"I am," he said. "You have your pick of subject or subjects if you agree. You would be the strongest among the staff."

His tone was sincere—at least it seemed so. She wondered if her shock and suspicion had been that apparent in her expression.

"I may have stolen much from you, but this is my attempt to give you back what you have missed. This career would be entirely yours. I will not dare meddle in your career, even if you refuse this offer and go with something else or nothing entirely."

Her temple smarted. She wanted more water.

"I..." She swallowed, completely surprised by the offer. "I will think about it, my Lord. I am grateful."

He smiled, kissed the corner of her mouth.

"Of course, my Lady."

They had moved in an arc along the floor and were coming closer to the orchestra—Draco was sweeping her along, moving to dip her. She remembered to arch her back and gracefully bow her head backward—as she came up she got a good look at the string section—they still wore their blindfolds, and they were each of them wet with tears.

After two more dances together, Hermione nursed her water in her hands, standing to the side of the floor. Draco had been pulled away by some of his followers, eager to hear his tale of the demise of Neville Longbottom. He was confident and smirking as spoke, and their eyes were alight with glee to hear him tell it. Hermione had turned away, intending to slip out to the ladies', when a group of women had come to her and engaged her in conversation, and Hermione had left it as soon as she could.

Thankfully by now the headache and the spinning of the room had calmed down. Having finally relieved herself in a private bathroom, Hermione felt much better.

"Are you well, my Lady?" came George's voice behind her.

She had felt his presence before he had spoken and had not been startled.

"Yes," she said. "Come dance with me, won't you?"

She sent her water floating back to the table and waited for George to extend his hand, which he did, and he led her back onto the floor.

They had never danced before, not even back in their Hogwarts days. But as they faced each other, holding hands, and began to move, Hermione was struck with how much she suddenly missed Ron.

She pushed the thought away uneasily.

There are too many ghosts lingering around today.

George wore his finest robes and his hair was recently cut and styled well, flattering his face. But there was still that haunted look in his eye—one she supposed she must be

mirroring. His eyes were bright and attentive—but he still looked rather worn.

“You seem tired,” she said bluntly, inspecting his face. “How are you?”

The corner of his lip tilted in a smile. “My Lord had my men and I at the explosion site, combing it for any other devices Longbottom might have planted. He said there were none, but we made sure of it. The Aurors only cleared the site about an hour and a half ago.”

“How many casualties total?” she asked.

“Fourteen,” he said. “And eight injured. They are recovering in St. Mungo’s. I don’t think some of them will make it. They were badly burnt.”

“Draco will want to visit them, I think,” Hermione murmured, her stomach turning. “To boost his image.”

“He hasn’t mentioned it yet,” George admitted. “At least not to me. But I reckon you’re right. It would work wonders for his public image—not that his current one is lacking.”

He twirled her.

“My Lord informed me of Neville’s fate,” George said, his voice lower now. His eyes were on John, standing beside Pansy by the throne. “That’s him, then.”

“Yes,” Hermione breathed. “It wasn’t my decision to bring him here. I had hoped he would have killed him at once and then Lovegood, just to get it over with.”

George was in no way fazed by her words. He nodded.

“It’s his right to soak in his victory,” he replied, a little defensively. “But it would’ve been best for everyone if he had.”

His hand was warm in hers, and the other one on her back was strangely comforting.

“My Lord is watching us,” he said, warning in his tone.

“Let him,” Hermione said. “I’ll dance with whoever I please, and he can’t stop me.”

Her eyes found Draco, still in that throng of followers, watching her. He didn’t seem angry, but his gaze was heated with something other than anger.

Are you jealous, my Lord? She asked, adding a teasing lilt to her tone.

Perhaps a little, Draco sent back. I am a greedy man, and want you only in my arms.

I knew as much. Maybe that’s why I asked George to dance with me.

He chuckled. *I suppose it would be in poor form to hoard you on my arm all evening. There’s a line of fellows working up the courage to ask their Lady to dance.*

Hermione glanced to the side and saw some of those men, watching her intently and appearing as though mentally preparing themselves to pounce in her path the moment George departed.

Maybe I’m not in the mood to oblige every last one of them.

A Lady is gracious and welcoming towards her guests, he reminded her. And tonight, it's imperative you play your part.

And if Nott is one of those men? She asked pointedly.

Then you'll continue to work your magic on him. He's close to caving in. Do what you think best. I mean to promote him—I thought him a fool, but he's been more than useful. Perhaps he will work more closely with the Eyes and keep watch over the general population. He will not deny my request for his land. Not after tonight.

And then will you come save me from all those wandering eyes?

Mine own are among them, firebird, he said, his voice heavy with want. Rest assured my greed will win over my patience at some point tonight, and I'll trap you back in my arms so no one can have you but me.

Hermione closed the connection. Draco gave her a playfully threatening look, and finally turned away to resume speaking with his men.

She closed her eyes, pressed her cheek on George's shoulder. "I just want to be at peace."

He didn't reply for a long time, but Hermione could sense that he felt the same.

The dance ended. There was applause. George and Hermione walked off the floor and stayed close to each other for a few minutes, neither saying anything until George broke the silence.

"I dreamt of Fred last night."

She looked at him. His eyes were tight with emotion but the rest of his face was still.

"What happened?" she asked softly.

George was staring straight ahead, unable to meet her eye, probably working hard to keep any emotion at bay.

The news of Neville's doings had not arisen much emotion in him. They had all been waiting for it to happen. But to see his dead twin brother again...

"I almost forgot what he looked like," George admitted, and there was the smallest crack in his voice. "My own twin. How could I ever forget?"

Hermione grasped his hand.

"Go," she said softly "Don't let the others see you like this. Meet me in the library."

He nodded and left, moving fast through the crush of people, his face carefully blank once more but his eyes still tight. Nobody really spared him a glance, but they did get out of his way as though not wanting to cross him. Hermione suspected that they feared him—a strange thought, considering it was George Weasley, who had once made her laugh so hard that apple juice came out her nose. But he was a different person now, and surely his position here and his eerie ability were enough to have the others scrambling to be on their guard around him.

Pansy appeared at her side.

“You have a crowd awaiting your hand for a dance,” she murmured. “I thought I might save you.”

Hermione smiled. “What would I do without you?”

Flustered by the compliment, Pansy, who always knew what to say, this time didn’t. But she smiled and bowed her head in thanks.

“Draco says I must dance with them,” Hermione said with some distaste. “But first I need to talk to George. I won’t be long.”

She left Pansy there and exited the hall swiftly, raising her head and locking her eyes straight ahead so that nobody would approach. As they had moved for George, they moved now for her but with more grace, bowing as she passed. Hermione acknowledged them with a nod.

She was just about to reach the door when Draco, from across the hall, caught sight of her.

Where are you going? His voice was harsher than it had been before.

George dreamt of his brother last night, she replied patiently, her back to him. *He left the room. I just want to make sure he’s alright.*

There was a pause.

I trust you, he said at last. *Go see him, then. But you **will** return. I won’t let you hide yourself.*

Of course, my Lord.

The library was lit when she entered; George was standing by the fire, his hands clasped behind his back. The fire’s light danced along the fine silver embroidery along his robes. His hair was vividly red in that light. He met her eye and looked away as if he were embarrassed.

“I didn’t mean to worry you, my Lady,” he said, his voice strained. “You needn’t come after me. I’ll be well again soon enough.”

She was quiet for a moment.

“Whenever I had moments of grief over my past life, Draco was the farthest thing from sympathetic,” she said, her voice soft like the flickering of the fire. “He insists that I move on, that I shouldn’t wallow. How am I supposed to lay it to rest when I can’t even think about it without him mocking me?”

Fred had turned to face her fully now, his expression one of quiet understanding.

“You have a right to grieve,” she said, approaching slowly. “Don’t be ashamed of what you feel.”

He nodded. His mouth spasmed and there was a soft choking noise before he closed his mouth again, silencing it.

“I thought I was past this,” he muttered, shaking his head. “I can’t afford to let it affect me now. I *can’t*.”

“What happened in the dream?” Hermione asked, frowning. “Was it bad?”

She had reached him now and took his cheek in her hand, making sure to lock the doors of the library with a simple charm at the same moment. Not that what they were doing was scandalous in any way, but things could get taken out of context faster than spreading fire.

"I saw him... as vivid as if he were here now. Said he's been looking for me," George said, his voice hoarse. Hermione went cold. His eyes were closed. "That he misses me. That my *family* misses me."

He bowed his head to hide his face—by now, tears were running down his cheeks. Hermione's heart stirred.

"I felt *complete*," he gasped, his words coming out in a rush of emotion. "He was happy—laughing. Just like it used to be, when he was alive. I didn't want that dream to end."

Hermione took his other cheek in her hand, now holding his face. An unwelcome rush of emotion flooded her. So much was happening so quickly—she felt like she was being pulled apart by grief, by her growing ability to *not* feel anything. Draco was right—life was easier when emotions didn't get in the way. It was little wonder he had rushed to make her that Horcrux.

"You're not the only one who wants to be at peace, my Lady. I would've joined my family a long time ago if my Lord hadn't forbidden me from doing what it took to accomplish that."

Hermione's frown deepened.

"My Lord told me that he learned from all your attempts, that he uses the same magic that binds you to keep me from escaping my servitude."

"I'm sorry, George," Hermione whispered. "I wish there were a way..."

He didn't reply for some moments. He held himself perfectly still, but his body was drawn so tight Hermione could only guess at the turmoil underneath that still picture. She put her hand on his shoulder, squeezing tight, remembering how pressure helped her in similar moments of anguish.

"He said I'll join him soon anyway," George said, scrubbing at his face, straightening. His eyes were red and raw. "Whatever that means, however it happens—it gave me hope."

George composed himself quickly afterward. Hermione had watched him carefully in silent fascination as all trace of emotion had cleared from his face, leaving it a neutral mask. His eyes lost their redness and relaxed, all tension left his body. She wondered if that was what she looked like when she steeled herself to whatever horrors Draco brought up.

"I didn't mean to take your time, my Lady," he said, looking a little chagrined. "But I'm honored to receive your care."

"Of course," Hermione replied. "I still care for you, George, despite everything."

He was kneeling before her, to her surprise—before Hermione could take a step back, he took both her hands and pressed reverent kisses to their backs.

“You have my thanks, my Lady,” he said, and curiously, his eyes were still closed. “My life is yours.”

Hermione frowned.

“George, I didn’t help you to ask for something in return,” she said, grabbing his arms and tugging him back onto his feet with some trouble. “I helped you because you are my friend.”

However shallowly the term applied. They rarely spoke or sought each other out, and Draco’s involvement in the whole thing ethically muddled the relationship—she was one of his masters, and he the servant—but Hermione couldn’t bear to think of it that way. He had been a friend once. In her eyes, he still was—they shared a history and a family (in a sense). That may have been years ago, but it was enough.

“It’s yours regardless,” he said. “I know you wouldn’t ask for anything in return. I have no right to ask anything of *you*, but I think by now you know why I’m giving it to you. I trust you completely.”

Hermione’s frown deepened. She inspected his face thoroughly. He still would not open his eyes.

The reason why struck her then.

“You don’t want him to see.”

“I don’t think he’s watching,” he replied. “Usually, I can feel it. But I want to make sure. My Lord has no part in this conversation.”

Now his words from before were processing in her mind.

“You want me to kill you,” she whispered, going pale.

He didn’t nod but she saw it in the tension between his brows. That silent plea.

Hermione felt ice drip down her spine.

“Why would you ask me to do that?”

As if she wasn’t dragging enough corpses behind her already. He would be the first willing party—but that wouldn’t make it any lighter a burden.

“He won’t kill me,” George breathed. ‘Even if I displease him severely. He knows it’s what I want. Every year I’m still alive is another punishment.’ He shook his head. “I’ve got nothing left. All I want is to see my family again, my Lady. You would be granting my wish. *You* could give me peace.”

Hermione turned away, hiding her face in her hands. The library spun slowly around her.

“When? *How*?”

Here, he faltered.

“Whenever the opportunity presents itself,” he replied firmly, and then his voice gentled. “You would be setting me free. Please, my Lady—Hermione. I beg you. Think about it.”

She left him there in the library to compose himself and headed straight for an unused room on the second floor. With most everyone still in the dining hall, she went unnoticed.

Hearing the door slam shut behind her brought no relief—Hermione still felt on edge. Although she had sobered down from the wine her legs still felt unsteady. She pressed her hand to her stomach and closed her eyes, tried to regain her breath.

Get hold of yourself. Draco will get suspicious if you stay away too long. Get back to the party before he comes to haul you back.

As if her thoughts had roused him, the channel opened and Draco's voice entered her mind, causing her to jump.

The party is missing its brightest ornament, wife. Where are you?

In the spare bedroom beside ours, she replied.

Are you alright?

I needed a moment to readjust my dress.

You might have asked me for help. His tone was seductive.

Hermione steeled herself.

Another time. I'm on my way back, my Lord.

Wait, he said suddenly. Stay where you are. I'll send Nott to you. Work your magic on him, sweetling.

What did that even mean?

He's proved more resistant than I expected, Draco surmised. He seems quite attached to his estate. I nearly Imperiused him for it the other day, in fact. I am losing patience.

Why can't you just build a new one or buy a better one?

It isn't about what's newer or better, Draco said, sounding as though he were giving a lecture. It's about showing him nothing is more important than serving the will of his Lord. He should not have anything that is more important than me.

What if I choose to touch him? Hermione asked. *That might persuade him better.*

I might watch, first, he said, sounding amused. Before I rip you away and have you in front of him to show him how it's done... maybe I'll have him lick your cunt clean at the end. A higher honor, I can't imagine.

Hermione said nothing. She could think of a number of higher honors, actually, and none of them sexual.

He could never satisfy you. Not like I can.

You sound so sure of yourself. Maybe you don't satisfy me enough.

Is that a challenge, sweetheart? I believe we've been over this before... but I'd be happy to do it again.

Why would I bother challenging you? You seem to have burdened yourself with that notion constantly, judging by the way you act.

You never complain when I leave you quivering and swollen and half-conscious.

I have, she shot back. You never listen.

But you still enjoy it, he said, infuriatingly calm. That, to me, speaks more truth than your words do.

Well I'm tired of your love, she said, emboldened by the lingering effects of all that drink. Maybe I want to experience something new.

You're trying to make me jealous... and it's working. Careful what games you play, firebird. If you fuck him, you provoke retaliation.

I expect nothing less from you, my Lord.

There was a pause.

I've told him where you are, he said. He's on his way. He thinks you've summoned him.

He trailed off for a moment.

You know I'm right, he finally added. No matter who else you decide to lie with—they will never compare to what we have. You will grow bored of him. You'll crave my touch.

I won't have you control me like this anymore, Hermione snapped. You groomed me to your tastes and kept me from discovering what I wanted or liked on my own.

Fine, he shot back, his voice cold. Continue lying to yourself that is what you want when you have a Lord sleeping beside you.

Surprised, Hermione faltered.

*I can't tell if you're being honest or not, she admitted. But I wasn't asking for your permission. I'm tired to death of having to live under your rules. I'm your equal and I **will** have power over my own life.*

I was honest, he said, and strangely, the anger in his voice had gone. He sighed heavily. I'm trying to compromise to keep you happy. You know I'll do anything for you to stay.

This only stunned her further.

*We're in a new phase of our lives, he continued. It would be remiss of me to continue leashing you as your power grows. If you want a plaything then take one, as long as you keep in mind that your cunt is **mine** only.*

Hermione struggled to find a response. Draco had always been possessive. Lethally so. She had the scars to prove it. To hear him say this now was so bizarre she couldn't help but suspect that he was still lying.

No, she said firmly. I'll have everything I want.

There was a long pause.

She could picture him now, with his whole body tense and his eyes cold. Had she spoiled his fun? She certainly hoped so.

You'll learn the truth anyway. It's only a matter of time. But if it's what you wish-fine.

*I do. And you will **not** punish me for this. I don't care how much it pains you. This is only part of what I owe you for all the years you've controlled me.*

I'll ask only a few things of you, then.

What?

You'll always use contraceptive. I won't accept a bastard in my family.

I always planned on using them, she replied coolly. What else.

You'll always Obliviate them after. Unless you take only one.

That was more reasonable than she had expected. Hermione mulled it over.

Anything else?

Does it need saying? He prompted. *That you always remember that ultimately:*

The promise, false as it was. That cursed mantra he loved to force her to repeat countless times in years past.

I'm yours.

You're mine, he agreed. As I am yours, Hermione. No matter who or what comes between. You'll never be rid of me. We're meant to be together-for better or worse.

Hermione sighed, the heavy truth sinking down inside her like a stone.

I know.

There was another pause.

Charm him quickly, and then come back to me.

And then the connection ended.

Hermione pressed a palm over her heart, measuring its quick beat. How strange that it should still beat at all.

What the hell was in the air that all this was taking place in one day? She *never* would have expected Draco to relent on something like this. She had been prepared to do it anyway without even mentioning it to him. She would have found Martin, lured him away from the dining hall, and had him. That he had actually agreed to step aside and let her choose on her own was nothing short of miraculous, and her thoughts ran freely with the joy and anticipation of this most-desired freedom.

Another shard of control over her own life. It was almost too good to believe. Even if he took back his word and decided to punish her over this, she had the power to fight back now.

Right away she thought of Martin, her heart lifting with anticipation. Where might he be now? She'd not had a chance to speak to him yet.

She'd been moving to exit the room when there was a knock on the door, and she cursed silently, remembering her current task.

"My Lady?" came Theo Nott's voice from the other side. "My Lord said you called for me."

Hermione sighed, straightened, squared her shoulders.

"Enter."

He did so, the door closing behind him. He seemed a little unsure but there was no hostility in her glance which put him at ease, and he bowed before approaching.

"Is something the matter, my Lady? Is my assistance required?"

"As a matter of fact, there is something I want from you," she said. She had sat down in the green loveseat by the window and motioned for him to join her.

"Come here."

He did so gladly—his movements a little jerky from nerves, but left a respectable gap between them.

"How may I help you?" he asked. "I am at your disposal, my Lady."

"Has the Prophet prepared its next issue?" she asked. "How much will it say about the explosion?"

"I've arranged it all to the narrative my Lord desires," he said. "Luckily, reporters were too afraid to come to the site in time to witness Longbottom's arrest. They only started coming out when the Ministry got word that he was killed and the site was cleared. That makes things easier for us. Tomorrow, *Prophet* readers will learn of his terrorist plot and his well-deserved death."

Hermione nodded, tilting her head in appreciation as she looked at him.

"That's good to hear."

He wasn't the sort of man to flush with pleasure. He gave a shrug as though it were nothing but she sensed he was proud of his involvement in Draco's latest scheme.

"Was that all, my Lady?"

"Hermione," she said. "You may call me Hermione when we're in private."

Surprised, his eyes went a little wide, but he nodded.

"Of course... Hermione."

His eyes lingered on her face, roaming from her face to her lips. Once, with a fleeting glance, down to her chest. Lord, but he couldn't help himself, could he? Men truly had no shame.

He is an easy mark, the voice whispered in her ear. It would take so little to seduce him.

Hermione hadn't actually intended to seduce him. Her sights had been set solely on Martin. But why allow herself only a nibble when she could have a whole bite—several of

them? It would also serve to annoy and anger Draco, too, and that was more than enticing. This whole thing must be a huge blow to his ego. He would regret the day he'd forced that stupid ring on her finger.

"Theo," Hermione began, looking a little troubled. "Draco wants to move us to Russia. I don't pretend to know why. I don't want to leave here. He won't listen to me."

"He's mentioned it before," Theo said, frowning. "I never asked why."

"I don't want to go so far away," Hermione replied, looking down into her lap. "Where I don't know anybody. Draco will be busy with the finalization of the school, and I'll be left alone again for long periods of time."

"You have your son," he said. "Don't you spend time together?"

"Of course," Hermione admitted. "And there is nothing I love more. But one can be overexposed to one's own family, don't you think? I need adult conversations after an hour of reading fairy tales."

He swallowed quietly.

"I have an estate there," he offered. "In Moscow. You are most welcome to pay a visit. You and my Lord. I would be deeply honored."

"He wants to promote you, you know," Hermione said casually, catching Theo off guard. She inspected his reaction of surprise—it was genuine and chased the desire from his eyes. "He and I think it's time. You've earned it."

"Really?"

He looked so shocked that she couldn't help but chuckle.

"You've proved yourself well in your service," she said. "Draco wishes to reward your loyalty. He thinks you'd make a good edition to his Eyes."

The distinction of such a position was not lost on Nott. He sat up a little straighter, looking so chuffed it nearly made her laugh.

Really, he wasn't so bad looking. She'd never given him much notice back in their school days, only familiar with him from whispers about his snobbish character, but she supposed he was rather attractive. He was a bit of a smarmy prick and he had quite the habit of ogling, but he wasn't as bad as Draco.

Really, it was quite a low bar where Draco was concerned. A dementor for a husband sounded like paradise when kept into such an unequal marriage for this long.

And she didn't particularly *like* him, but the taste of freedom, however meager, was as good an aphrodisiac as any.

You never swore any marriage vows to him, the warped, hungry voice told her. He forced them on you. He denied you so many experiences. Your husband gave you this freedom expecting you to fail. Deny him the satisfaction. Take advantage. Take your pleasure.

Moving before she could think twice, Hermione reached forward and brushed some hair from his eye. Theo went absolutely still.

"I believe Draco's expressed interest in your estate," she murmured.

"He has," Theo said, swallowing again. "I know he wants it. I want nothing more than to please my Lord, but that land has been in my family for generations. I vacationed there as a boy with my mother, and it's full of family history. Can you see why I struggle to part with it?"

Hermione moved her hand to cover his, where it sat atop his knee. His eyes locked on hers, a little startled, but confusion and desire swirling in their depths.

And fear.

"Draco doesn't like to be denied," she said softly. "Or to be kept waiting. You risk angering him. Do you wish to displease him after I've just told you he is going to promote you?"

He shook his head. His hand twitched, turning over so that now he held her hand, and his eyes never left hers, a question always in his eyes, as if seeing whether she would change her mind or not.

"I'll talk to him," Hermione said, keeping her voice low and smooth and a little seductive, to soothe him. "I'll make sure that you get to keep anything important that's still inside. Draco doesn't want to change the place, he just wants a beautiful place to live. I'm sure he would honor it, considering its history—and isn't it an even greater honor, for him to want to add his own presence and legacy there?"

Considering Draco's plans for it he had told her of some time ago, it was an outright lie that he would leave the place untouched, but even then it didn't matter, did it?

Her hand had left his and lighted on his thigh—she felt the muscle jump in response. He was looking down at her hand, resting by his knee. He swallowed again.

"My Lady—" she moved her hand closer to his groin and he sucked in a breath. "My Lord made very clear the consequences of any flirtation—you are a temptation beyond words, but I can't disrespect him like this. Especially not tonight."

Hermione withdrew her hand—she had been perilously close to his cock, could see that bulge in his trousers.

"He doesn't mind," she said. "Believe me. I have his encouragement."

He looked a little doubtful. Hermione couldn't blame him. He had not noticed yet how much he was leaning toward her.

"This isn't some cruel prank?"

Hermione shook her head.

"Little by little I'm restoring my own freedom," she said. "I'm as surprised as you are that he agreed to it. I won't live under his thumb any longer. But I believe your estate will blunt the edge of any anger he might hold after that decision."

"I suppose..." he said, still hesitant. "If having the place means so much to him, then I dare not refuse."

Ha!

Hermione gave him a dazzling smile. “You’re very selfless. I know my Lord will appreciate it, but I want to thank you on my own behalf.”

She moved quickly, moving over and straddling his lap before he could stand.

He stared at her in shock. She was cupping his throat in her palms. There was a strange urge inside her, egging her on. Not lust... but hunger. Strange considering she had eaten not so long ago.

“My Lady,” he whispered, his eyes wide.

She was shoving his cloak from his shoulders, undoing the buttons of his collar.

“Stay still,” she murmured. Gave an experimental grind of her hips against his groin.

‘*Fuck.*’ He mouthed the word, as if afraid to swear in her presence.

His throat exposed, Hermione leaned down to nuzzle against the warm skin there. She could see a vein running down his throat and felt that hunger sharpen like a knife in her throat. His adam’s apple bobbed with a loud swallow. She placed an open-mouthed kiss there at the vein, sucking on it briefly.

“Touch me,” she breathed into his ear. He shivered.

“I can’t,” he said, looking torn, but his hands belied his true wants, and were on her hips and travelling up to her waist, exploring her figure. Hermione gave another grind against him and he moaned.

“Draco thinks he has a monopoly over me and my body,” she hissed into his ear. “He never did.”

“If he finds us—”

She put a finger over his lips. His eyes were round, looking at her as though his dearest dream were coming true.

“If he does, there isn’t a damn thing he can say to me about it.”

He acquiesced. Hermione licked at a small patch of his throat, a couple inches below his ear. He shuddered. His hands were still on her hips but he held her so gently, like she were an egg he were afraid to break. That annoyed her.

“More,” she demanded.

He acted quickly, his hold on her tightening. That was better. She nuzzled against his throat again. He smelled rather good... not in an artificial sense but the natural scent of him. She nibbled at his skin. Her teeth were hurting and she wasn’t sure why.

His hands roamed upwards slowly. His gaze was intent on hers, as if making sure she agreed with what he was doing. Hermione didn’t stop him, not even when his hands reached the slips of silk that covered her breasts and slipped under them, found her bare skin.

“Gods,” he croaked, feeling them in his palms. “You’re unbelievable.”

Hermione had scarce let him get the words out before she was holding his head, guiding him down to her. He took her meaning and sprang into action, hungrily exploring her breasts with his mouth.

“Yes,” he said, his voice ragged.

Hermione moaned, gripping his hair tight. He’d taken one nipple into his mouth. Need flared inside her the longer he sucked. It was almost unbearable. She could feel his hard cock under her and his hands were delightfully demanding and his mouth still working at her. She was grinding on him again, and his moans vibrated against her flesh, tickling her a little.

Hermione found herself pretending he was Martin. This was what his hands on her would feel like, this was what his mouth would do to her. Where was he now? Would he be as eager as Nott? Her desire mounted.

Hermione took his face and pulled him away from her chest. He was panting, flushed, his eyes dazed. She repositioned herself so that now she knelt beside him and with her other hand Hermione reached into his trousers, undoing them by magic first, and taking him in her hand. She pulled his erection free from the fabric and let herself admire him for a moment.

Dig in, the voice told her. Nobody controls you. Nobody owns you.

She stroked him fast and hard, using his own precum as lubricant, as it had been abundant. He threw his head back, pressing into the back of the loveseat, exposing his throat further—just what she wanted.

She went back to it, licking and kissing and nipping. Not out of love and affection—but with the intent of preparation. He was groaning, his hips thrusting upwards into her touch.

“I’m going to cum,” he warned her through a depleted breath. “Gods, my Lady, I’m not worthy—”

“Shh,” she said sharply, and sank her teeth into his throat.

He jolted in surprise and pain, and came in the same instant.

The urge to bite that deep had been an instinct she could not repress. She was just as shocked as him, but it faded quickly and unable to help herself, she drove in deeper, feeling with morbid fascination how quickly her canines had lengthened and sharpened to allow such an effort.

He was gasping aloud and twisting his head away, tense under her touch but Hermione didn’t mind because his blood was flowing into her mouth and down her throat—more, when she sucked—and it was *good*. Hot. Splashing down her front, soaking into her gown. She didn’t care, kept drinking. There was something hypnotic about the act that compelled her not to stop, to keep going, and she suddenly understood why Draco enjoyed it so much, why he wanted it so often. Theo’s cock was throbbing in her palm and his come had stained his own clothes—she doubted he’d even noticed.

Hermione wasn’t sure how much she drank—her vision was fogged and her insides hot and happy and her stomach still not full. Theo had relaxed, but was still breathing fast. She wanted to drink until there was nothing left, but made herself let go.

It was the most curious sensation as she dislodged her teeth from his flesh. Not pleasant. Not horrible. Blood dripped from her chin.

She took a deep breath after, waited a moment, and then let out a belch, startling herself. But she didn't laugh. Only wiped at her mouth and stared down at herself and then at Theo, who had come to and was sitting up, wincing.

"I'm sorry," she heard herself saying. "I didn't know I could do that."

There was some fear in his eyes as he regarded his own blood all over themselves. His mouth was slack and his hand clapped over the wound, making himself cry out in pain.

"I..."

"Let me heal you."

And she did, waiting for him to begin screaming, or just run away.

"Are you a vampire?" he asked. His pupils were huge. He was shaking a little. Tried to hide it by busying himself with tucking his cock back into his trousers.

"I don't think so," she said. "Draco has the same thing. He doesn't seem to have changed."

She traced his cheek gently. He didn't even flinch. Rather remarkable—the devotion in his eyes was back, perhaps stronger than before. She couldn't believe it.

"Have I pleased you, my Lady?"

Her teeth had not yet gone back to normal. Hermione smiled, showing them to him. He stared at her in awe.

"Very much so," she said.

She let him recover, sliding back down his front to sit in his lap, watching his face carefully, afraid that she had gone too far.

"That was—" he shook his head, trying to scrounge up words. "That was—"

Hermione pressed her fingers to his lips, silencing him.

"It was," she said. "Thank you for letting me. I'm sorry about this."

Confusion registered across his face, but it was too late.

Hermione tapped his chin with her wand.

"Imperio," she said, watching his eyes go dull.

"You'll stay here for a bit," she instructed. "Get your wits back. Summon yourself some food and drink if you feel really unwell."

He nodded. She felt his forehead, decided his temperature was regular.

Next, she made sure the wound was gone, and to vanish the blood from his clothes and body—but not from hers.

Hermione stroked his face—his eyes were on hers the entire time, placid and blank.

Surely an Imperio was better than Obliviating him entirely. She may not want to actually fuck him, but she was certain she would want to dally with him again. Perhaps just because it would needle Draco to no end. Perhaps because she liked how awestruck he seemed by her. Did it really matter? A pawn was a pawn. She only hoped Draco would not kill him too quickly over it.

They had no mercy for you, the voice hissed. *Return that favor.*

“If anyone finds you here, you’ll tell them you had too much to drink and came to sleep it off,” she told him. He was still seated, looking as neat as he’d been when he’d entered.

“You will not tell *anyone* what happened here between us... except Draco if he asks.” And then she took his chin, tipped his face up to meet her eye better. “This is our little secret. And if you behave, we’ll get to do it a second time.”

“Yes, my Lady.” He bowed his head in submission and she put her wand away.

Theo’s eyes cleared—he came to, found her standing before him, adjusting her dress. He watched silently, his eyes still hungry.

“You’re going back?” he asked.

“I have to,” Hermione said. “It’s Draco’s party, after all. I have to please him to get what I want.”

He swallowed. “Like me.”

She gave him a vague smile, cupped his chin in her hand, gave him a kiss so sweet it might rot his teeth.

“Among other things,” she said, and then left.

She reentered the hall alone. Everyone’s eyes were on her instantly, and all went still.

Draco was on the throne on the opposite side of the room, far enough away that she had a small distance to walk to reach him amidst the sea of people, but she sensed when his eyes landed on her.

The floor was cold under her feet as she made her way to him in a straight line. The music had not stopped and seemed to herald her procession. She rather liked that but kept her face straight and her eyes daring. The others moved away, forming a path for her, watching her with wide, shocked eyes.

She reached the dais at last and knelt into a deep curtsy before Draco, who stood and came to her, his eyes unreadable. His eyes swept up and down her form, taking in the still-wet blood soaking the front of her gown.

She was still there kneeling when he took her chin and tilted it up to meet his eye.

What have you done, sweetling?

She dared smile.

I had a snack.

There was the briefest flash of surprise in his eyes. Then, victory—as if he'd expected this. He grinned, took his hand from her chin and offered it to her.

Rise, wife. Come to our throne and tell me about it.

Nobody knew what to make of that grisly entrance. Spectacular as it had been to watch, they couldn't help but wonder whose blood that was all over Lady Malfoy. She had not appeared distressed in the slightest, so they had all assumed that it was not her own. Theo had already slipped back inside during Hermione's entrance, and everyone had been so transfixed on her that nobody had noticed him whatsoever.

She had joined Lord Malfoy on the throne—he had her on his lap now, his arm wrapped covetously around her. He also didn't appear upset in any way whatsoever, and they had waited a few minutes more for an explanation, but none was offered and no one was brave or fool enough to ask. So the party resumed.

Most of the others had gone back to dancing. A table of light refreshment had appeared about an hour ago and there were small assorted groups milling around, nibbling on the small offerings and talking amongst themselves, roaring with laughter occasionally. Other pairs and small groups were on the sides of the floor, talking privately, goblets in their hands. She saw Martin dancing with a lady she didn't recognize for the second time that night and felt a twist of jealousy in her gut.

Hermione watched it all from the throne, seated upon Draco's lap.

His cock was hard against her, his hands tight around her waist, forcing her to grind on him. Hermione could feel eyes watching them.

"What a divine night," he was sighing, his breath heavy on her ear. "I don't think I've been quite this happy for some time."

She had told him everything. It was no use trying to hide it... *and* she had hoped it might ruin his night. But he had surprised her. He had been proud of her work and thanked her with a hungry pair of kisses. Said he'd settle the matter of the Russian estate with Theodore later, so he could have the name on the deed fixed. He'd made her open her mouth for him and inspected her teeth, teased her that she would have to use her fangs on him the next time she decided to kill him. There'd been no anger in his reaction whatsoever, and she was still reeling from it. Still suspicious that he was only hiding his rage because they were in front of everyone else and he wanted to keep her actions secret.

He'd said he was willing to compromise to keep her happy. The words played over and over in her head.

So after years of his rampant selfishness, he's finally decided to change.

"I didn't know you were capable of happiness," she said. "Rather, I thought your happiness is conflated with smugness. You confuse the two so intricately, after all."

He chuckled.

"I think you're right, firebird." He kissed her shoulder. "Tell me you're having a good time."

"I suppose it isn't the worst gathering we've held. But it is overwhelming," was all she could say. There seemed to be no static moments that night—she could scarcely recall having a single moment to herself. Lucio was already gone to bed and Pansy too occupied to seek out for a chat, and she couldn't see Martin anymore—had he slipped out? She felt tired. Drained. Wanted to go crawl into bed and let her body process everything that had happened that day.

"Yet you've done remarkably well," he said, rubbing her arm encouragingly. "Just as I knew you would. That deserves a reward, I should think."

"Does that mean I can go?" she asked, serious. "To bed, that is."

He answered by lifting his hands from her waist to begin massaging her back, his strong fingers digging into her muscles.

He kissed her shoulder again, shifted his hips to rub against her.

"It's the blood, isn't it?" she murmured, stifling a laugh. It was still all over her dress and throat, trailing down her chest. Her dress had yet to dry completely. "I knew you would like it."

He was kneading her muscles, chasing away leftover tension. His hands were strong and sure. It felt good—Hermione relaxed a little.

"How well you know me. You do know I love to drown innocence in horror. It becomes you so well."

He was pulling the straps of her dress down her shoulders. Hermione resisted at first but he gently pushed her hands away.

"I can't wait any longer. I want to have you right here, right now."

I thought you wouldn't want to after I...

*I will **always** want you,* he assured her firmly. *Nothing will ever change that, sweetling.*

The straps were pooled at her elbows. Hermione had her hands up over the silk on her breasts, glancing warily at the party below, where no one seemed to have noticed yet.

Don't be shy, Hermione. This is your Lord taking his right. They wouldn't dare judge us. I'm going to fuck you deep in front of all of them and fill you up to bursting with my cum. And if we're lucky and conceive tonight, they'll all have been witness to something beautiful.

There was movement of fabric behind her—she felt his cock come free from his trousers—large, heavy, and hot, it rested against the small of her back.

His hands roamed over her, squeezing and kneading.

I want you bouncing on my cock for them all to see and envy. I want your tits in my mouth and your cunt stuffed with my cock and your moans echoing around the room. Now stand and face me.

When she did so, she couldn't help but look into the crowd and saw a few of them had noticed her and were watching curiously. She steeled herself, turning away and toward Draco. Before Draco could give the order, she put her hands down. Although the straps of her gown now sat perilously low, she was not yet totally exposed.

You knew this was coming, she reminded herself. *Be grateful he waited until you were ready.*

She turned to face Draco. He watched her, approval and lust gleaming in his eyes.

"Come to me, Persephone," he murmured.

The way he sat on the throne, with his legs spread and not quite slouching but something in between that and perfect posture, with his eyes half-lidded and his huge cock standing erect and imposing from his trousers screamed arrogance at its finest. He stroked himself lazily, watching her. His platinum wedding band and the golden circlet in his near-white hair shone like a star. She could feel his want as though it were a mass of writhing, invisible arms reaching out toward her.

She wanted to reply with snark. But she couldn't deny the heat and wetness growing between her legs—by the tilt of his lip, he knew it, too.

Draco rarely called her by that name. He had alluded to that classical myth few times before in the early years of their marriage. Had referred to himself as Hades and each of his manors as the Underworld. And she, the evergreen Persephone, doomed to forever be his queen.

Whenever he'd brought it up she'd roll her eyes, brush it off as part of his arrogant lunacy, that he dared liken himself to a god. Over the years, however, she'd begun to dread the thought that he truly believed himself (and her, by unfortunate extension) to be incarnations of the two gods. That this went beyond a mere roleplay she had never consented to be part of.

The way he had dressed her tonight... the fact he was calling her *that* now... Hermione shuddered as she went to him and sat astride his lap.

There were more eyes on them than before—Hermione felt the intensity of these stares like a brand on her skin, boring into her bare back. Draco shifted a little so they were better accommodated in the large throne. His hands gripped her hips and she looped her arms around his neck, feeling oddly like a ballerina in that position, arching into him. Draco's gaze threatened to melt her. Hermione was half-tempted to tease him, work him up to the edge and leave, but knew that wouldn't fly this time.

Is this to your liking, Hades? She asked, giving a subtle grind of her ass against his erection. He practically purred aloud, his eyelids dropping a fraction lower. His fingers dug into her flesh.

Everything about you is to my liking, sweetheart. Everything.

His eyes were mouths, swallowing her whole. She was wet, pulsing for fulfillment. Although Nott had started a fire in her she'd ignored it, not wanting to go all the way so quickly. She would make him work for it. And Martin... well, she doubted she would get a chance to pull him aside tonight. That would have to wait. She didn't want it to be a rushed experience, anyway. If he consented, she was going to savor it when it happened.

Hermione took the fabric of her skirt, readjusting it so that it would not get in the way. Luckily, the skirt had strategically placed slits at her hips on each side that allowed Draco easy access to her, which was part of why it was his favorite dress of hers. He helped her, guiding her down onto his cock, gasping quietly as she impaled herself. She reached down behind herself, caressed his sack in slow strokes. Inch by inch he stretched her and she shivered with pleasure.

His cock throbbed inside her. She watched his pupils dilate further. He groped at her ass over the silk, spreading her cheeks. Hermione bit her lip, steadying herself.

Goddess, he said. You are everything I ever wanted. Everything I need.

She realized dimly that there were no more voices in the background noise, that there was only that haunting music. They must all be watching, then. Her ears glowed with heat, but just as quickly she felt an alien lust, not her own, wash over her, stroking her nerves. It was like a pail of hot water had gently poured over her. Her nipples hardened and she ached with a need so fierce that it almost made her dizzy. In the span of two seconds she was sopping wet between her legs, pulsing and on the verge of orgasm, all her nerves on fire for him.

Hermione gasped, arching her back as his hands trailed up to her breasts, pulling the silk down fully to the waist, baring her to him. He teased her flesh for a moment, kneading them tightly and she moaned. He reached up to cup her face, one of his thumbs tracing her bottom lip.

There was no need for that, she said, and her lips parted, her cheeks flushing as the aphrodisiac spell continued working its way through her body. She clenched around him and Draco groaned but didn't move.

Yes, there was, he said. I want you to enjoy this and so you will. Thoroughly. Now fuck me, wife.

Draco in turn had his head tilted back, his mouth slack with lust. His hands dug into her hips hard enough to leave bruises, appreciating every curve, the softness of her body compared to his.

I bet you didn't burn half as much when you were with him, he said.

Hermione chose not to respond.

She braced herself, began to thrust back down on him at a pace she didn't normally use.

He moaned aloud, his head falling back to rest against the throne.

Yes, he begged. More, Hermione. Give me more.

She ignored him, her eyes half-closed and her breasts bouncing as she moved. Draco watched them hungrily for a moment, savoring the view before he buried his face in her

breasts, his mouth roaming all over her skin. She clenched around him again—her mind went blank with pleasure.

Did he make you feel like this? He asked. When he had your tits in his mouth?

Hermione took his throat in one hand, applying pressure with her grip—not enough to harm, but silently telling him to shut up. He understood and dropped the subject, hissing through his teeth with pleasure.

That's right, sweetling, he encouraged her. My darling slut. Show them how well I've trained you. How badly you want it.

He was sucking hard on one nipple, flicking it over and over with his tongue. He gave one sharp upward thrust of his hips and she gasped, her hips bucking.

“Use me,” he was whispering heatedly, his voice a heavy breath against her. “Use my cock, firebird. Take what’s yours.”

The aphrodisiac spell amplified her need into raw, feral hunger—there was no room for gentleness here. Hermione gave in to it and moved to match that fire, rolling and thrusting her hips to pleasure herself.

His grip on her breasts was too hard and bordering on painful, but it did little to dampen her pleasure. She liked it, in fact. He had switched to her other nipple and teased it with his teeth before suckling on that one as well as she bounced in his lap, senseless mewls and whimpers coming from her throat at the stimulation of her husband’s mouth.

They're watching us, Draco said. I can see the envy in their eyes. They all want what we have. They could try all their sorry lives to match us. They never will.

Hermione pulled his head away from her breasts with some effort, as he had resisted. She had paused and he gave a soft groan of protest.

Her hand was on his stomach and trailing upwards, exploring the muscle all along his form until she reached his throat, and an idea struck.

Draco’s hands were gripping her waist and he was pulling her closer to him, fire blazing in his eyes.

Don't you dare stop now.

Hermione stroked at his jaw. He leaned into her touch.

I'm not finished.

She bent down and kissed him—he reciprocated ravenously, opening his mouth wide to let his tongue roam. Hermione was barely able to break away, his cock still throbbing and impatient inside her. She raised herself up to stand on her knees, burying her head into his shoulder the same way she had done to Theo before the feeding. She kissed him there, giving a slow roll of her hips at the same time. His heat, his scent—intoxicating. She wanted to crawl inside of him, to snap all his ribs in two.

“Fuck,” he muttered. His hands were attempting to pull her away so she could resume properly but Hermione resisted, still kissing at his jaw and throat.

Heed me, Hermione—I'm losing patience.

*Heed **me**, Draco. You'll have your turn soon enough.*

And then she bit him.

He stiffened in shock, and then melted in the next instant as Hermione's teeth drove deep and she began to suck at him.

"Hermione," he whispered thickly. His hands around her had gone slack.

Yes, my Lord?

His blood was pouring down her throat. She drank greedily, not wanting any to go to waste. Red clouded her vision. His heat, his blood, were now hers. He was coming inside her—had he even noticed? She could feel his cock giving a strong pulse with each pump. She could not see his face but knew that she had shocked him, and in that same vein she had probably pleased him, too.

Have I finally managed to render you voiceless? She asked teasingly.

He came to, his eyes glazed. Stared at her in dark wonder.

Then he looked away and addressed the watching crowd.

"The party is over," he announced with a magnified, commanding voice, looking out at his followers beneath them. "Your presence here is noted and appreciated. Make your way home. My wife demands my full attention."

There were knowing smiles around the room and at once, the place began to clear out. Draco didn't even wait until every guest was gone. He wrapped his arms around his wife, still buried inside her and her sweet little mouth still sucking on his vein, and Apparated them to the bedroom, carrying her to the bed where he sat against the headboard, cradling her to him. He slid out from her but did not mind—he was more than ready for another round. And another.

Hermione finally extracted herself from his throat for a moment, licking her lips. He watched her, fascinated. His cock was still hard and raring to go again. She had not come yet, and he would see to it at once. They had all night to continue the celebration and he would make the most of it.

Hermione smiled—her mouth and teeth were stained red.

My beautiful little monster, Draco thought, ringing with pride. *Look how wonderful you are now.*

Pansy and Neville were overseeing the last of the drunken, randy guests leave. Most of them had watched the spectacle the Lord and Lady had put on, and then decided to start ones of their own among the audience. It made for quite a bit of tidying up to do now. Neville was looking around in disgust, still shocked at what he'd seen. Pansy was already working to the utmost efficiency, leaving a trail of cleanliness where she went. Neville had watched her dumbly in awe for a moment until realizing it was his job, too. He set to work, trying not to

think about the disturbing sight of Hermione drinking Malfoy's blood in front of everyone. Several panicked thoughts and suspicions were demanding his attention but he was tired and overwrought and *could not* deal with that, too.

He was summoning some rubbish off the floor when he sensed someone approach from behind—he turned quite by reflex, holding his hand out as though he had his wand drawn, and then realized his mistake. He thrust his hand down, turning pale.

Theodore Nott stood there watching him with an amused bend to his lip.

What do you want? Neville wanted to snap, but held his tongue. He'd caught Nott staring at him multiple times that night.

"Never seen you around here before," Nott said. "You're new, aren't you?"

Neville only nodded. Tried turning away to get back to work, but Nott spoke up again.

"What's your name, then?"

"John," Neville replied curtly.

"No surname?"

"If I have one, I don't remember it."

"Pleased to meet you, then, *John*. What a simple name... Are you sure it's not something longer?" Nott asked, and behind that mischievous gleam there was recognition in his eyes.

"If you know who I am then there's no need for stupid games," Neville said through clenched teeth. "What do you want?"

"Nothing," Nott said simply. "I just wanted to have a look at the poor sod who ever thought he could win against Lord Malfoy."

Neville was seconds away from launching himself at him, but Nott had already sauntered away.

Fuming, Neville turned away. Made himself picture Luna before he did anything rash.

There was a hand on his shoulder suddenly—he went tense and whirled around, his fist ready at his side to plant itself into Nott's face.

It was Pansy. With them being the only two left in the great room, her eyes were now unguarded. Sympathetic.

"I'll sort out the rest," she said. "You go on."

He was going to protest—Lord Malfoy surely would not like it if he came out and saw that his new servant was shirking his duties. But Parkinson seemed to have control over the place and so he must learn to listen to her judgement.

Neville nodded, too weary to say anything else. It had been a long and most disturbing day. He didn't think he would be sleeping a wink tonight... not with Luna and what he had done heavy on his mind.

24. Mutualism

[THE FOLLOWING MORNING]

A quick knock at the door sounded just as he was mid orgasm. Draco was groaning in pleasure, his fangs caught in Hermione's throat, puncturing her flesh. He never drank neatly—her blood coursed down his throat, warming him from the inside with her essence. He was swallowing it sloppily, noisily, resulting in sloppy trickles down his own throat.

He could have been neater, but it was not in him—the act was so raw, so feral that he couldn't help himself. It struck something primitive and feral deep within him that pushed reason out of the way and narrowed his thoughts and actions down to one thing only: to *feast*.

They'd spent the entire night fucking. He had let her drink from him as much as she pleased, and never once felt weak from loss of blood. Food had been sent up to the room in case they needed to regain energy but neither had touched it save for some glasses of water. The sight and feel of Hermione sucking at him had driven him wild with pride and desire, and he'd abstained from drinking from *her*, so that she might enjoy herself and take all she wanted from *him*. She'd latched onto him like a babe, her eyes distant yet wild, his blood smeared all over her cheeks. The sight might have been horrifying to anyone else—Draco found it wildly erotic, especially when paired with the sensation of the suction of her lips on him.

Not a bit had gone to waste. He'd finished inside her again and again, pleasure gripping his body tight, and she'd moaned into his flesh and clutched at him, begging for more. Satiated, she'd finally released him, watched the wound heal itself, and her gaze was starry when it locked with his. Draco kissed her passionately after, rolling her underneath him, pushing her legs apart so she could take another load. It was so perfect—almost like a dream—but the feel of her on and around him was too real to deny. She had eventually collapsed, totally exhausted, a dreamy, affectionate cast to her gaze as she'd looked at him, her eyes closing. Draco kissed her, licked her lips clean. Pressed his forehead to hers and uttered thanks to a god he didn't believe in.

It had been the perfect day, with the perfect conclusion. He hadn't gotten a wink of sleep and felt no worse for wear. Rather, her hunger had woken his, and he had held himself back long enough: it was *his* turn to feed.

He felt her pulse so intimately whenever he drank from her, like her heart was inside him. A strange, lovely sensation. He wondered if she had noticed that, too. He ground into her, driving his cock as deep inside her as possible, his seed still spurting. Took another large gulp of her blood, felt it wash down his esophagus and shivered.

Mine.

The firm, round flesh of her ass yielded under his weight and her sweet heat welcomed him, held him so deliciously. It wrung at his nerves with pleasure, turning him inside out. His

back arched, pressing himself into her further. If she were awake for this she might have gasped in pain. It made him throb harder. He'd nearly howled.

There was another knock at the door, pulling him from his satisfied recollections.

"What," Draco barked, unhappily pulling his mouth free from her flesh. Hermione didn't even flinch in her sleep. "Enter."

The door opened. Longbottom was in the doorway with his eyes staring straight ahead but not seeing, as if he were bracing himself and his stance was much too rigid to be fully complacent. He blinked, registered the sight before him, and the color went from his face.

Draco, blood still dripping from his mouth, grinned at him. He rolled his hips one last time with a coarse moan.

Longbottom barely managed to recover his shock.

"You have a visitor, my Lord," he said, his voice stiff and blank. He was staring at the unconscious and freshly used Mrs. Malfoy in muted horror.

"Who?" Draco asked, pretending not to notice as he slid out of her wetly. She shifted but did not wake.

"Theodore Nott, my Lord," Longbottom said. He was looking back at the floor again, his face red—embarrassment, anger, or both? Probably both. Draco wanted to laugh. "He says he would like to speak to you about his estate."

Ah, yes. Pleasant news. Draco had completely forgotten about that business. Hermione hadn't reported the results of her efforts but he knew she would have mentioned it if Nott had refused. He felt his mood elevate a little higher. So he had finally relented. Excellent.

"Send him into my study," Draco said, rising from the bed, not caring in the least that his new servant could see him fully nude. "Then come back and tend to her wound. I'll see him when I'm ready."

Longbottom left with a rather jerky turning of his body, as if he were still in a state of shock. Draco chuckled, cleaned his body off with a wave of his hand. The taste of his wife still lingered heavy on his tongue. He did not mind it, but went to brush his teeth anyway.

That's only the start, he thought. Little by little, the things you will see here will make you lose your mind, Longbottom. They'll crush any resistance that still lives inside you.

He dressed quickly, went to the bed, pressed a kiss to Hermione's temple. She was still bleeding, but not heavily—a thin trickle leaked from each puncture wound. The wound had begun to heal when he'd pulled away but he stopped that with magic, wanting Longbottom to get an up-close look at it.

He must become intimately acquainted with what happens in this house, Draco thought. Or else what's the fun of keeping him around?

He trailed his hand over his wife's face gently—her body temperature felt fine. She frowned a little, feeling his touch, and shifted again.

"Shhh, sweetling," Draco murmured. "Don't trouble yourself."

Not until Longbottom's back.

Draco stared at Hermione for a moment, relishing the sight. He didn't think he'd taken that much blood—at least, not as much as she'd drunk from him. Draco dragged his fingers along the drying trail, brought it to his mouth, savored it. She was leaking cum between her legs as well. He had left marks all over her. Her delicious little mound was swollen and red from his abuse of it. There had been no time to take off her golden adornments, and they still gleamed on her flesh. Her hair had tangled viciously around the circlet on her head. The arm pieces had embedded themselves a little more firmly onto her flesh with the activities of the night—they would leave imprints behind for sure. The notorious green gown had been shredded to pieces and tossed to the floor—not for the first time. Draco repaired it easily, sent it to rest over the back of an armchair for Pansy to tend to later.

I ought to make copies of it, he thought, amused. One in every color. But green will always suit you best, my love.

The door opened and Longbottom returned. He bowed, but Draco could see his eyes were fixed on Hermione's form atop the bed, as though he were bowing only to her and not to him.

Draco didn't really care. Longbottom was under his control regardless.

"Heal her. Pansy will be with Lucio and his tutors. I'll expect you to go assist her once you've finished here. I'll be in my office in the meanwhile and will summon you if you're needed."

"Yes, my Lord."

Draco went to the door, about to exit, but instead he turned, watching as Longbottom quickly went to the bed and perched beside Hermione on the bed. He reached to her and checked her pulse, his other hand touching her forehead.

"She's survived so much worse than a simple bite," Draco said coolly. "I have great appetite, but I also have enough restraint to not bleed her to death. You should worry about her for a different reason: she was ravenous and took more from me than I did from her."

And he left.

Having found a steady pulse, Neville immediately healed the puncture wounds, but couldn't keep his face from contorting in dismay.

Malfoy, a vampire? Since when? And how?

And worse yet... he'd turned Hermione.

The wound was gone. Neville inspected the other side of her throat, wondering if there was more than one bite, but found nothing. He wondered if he ought to look over the rest of her but felt so awkward he didn't know if he could do it.

He stood to leave, not wanting to wake her but she was already stirring.

"Good morning, my Lady," he said, turning away, too conscious of her nudity. His ears had gone red.

There was a moment of silence as she regained her bearings, realized she was not alone.

“Why are you here?” she asked groggily.

How the hell was he supposed to answer that?

“...My Lord has a visitor,” he said awkwardly. “I came to inform him. He was drinking...”

There was a brief ruffling of sheets as she sat up, no doubt assessing herself. He felt a quiet intake of breath and wondered how badly the bite on her throat must have hurt.

“Oh, right,” was all she said. She did not sound surprised nor horrified at the revelation of what Neville himself could not say.

“Yes.” His ears had gone hotter. So this was something that happened often, then. He closed his eyes in shame.

So they *both* drank from each other. What sort of hell had he stepped into? How long had this been going on?

“He was drinking from you,” he managed to say. “Like a *vampire*. And you did too, last night.”

“I know,” she said. He heard the sound of her rising from the bed and moving around. He kept his back faithfully turned all the while, his eyes trained on the door.

“It’s one of his favorite things to do. I didn’t know I could do it until yesterday.”

“Are you-?” Neville asked.

“We aren’t vampires,” Hermione said, sounding a little scornful. There was a sudden squeal as all the drapes in the room were hauled back to let light in from the windows. “You can turn around now. I’m decent.”

He did.

The room was brighter now with morning light streaming in—she stood in the thick of it, the gold on her so bright that it stung at his eyes.

She’d dressed quickly—a long, close-fitting black dress with long sleeves. For as long as he had known her Neville had always thought Hermione to be pretty—beautiful, even, when the distortion lenses of platonic friendship sometimes slipped off.

Time and Malfoy’s love had changed her—she was undoubtedly still beautiful—it was hard to take his eyes off her sometimes, even last night, when she’d been covered in blood. But there was an edge to that beauty—she held herself stiffly as if she knew he was staring and trying to deflect it. There was a strange coldness to her that he had only detected in bits and pieces each fleeting time they had interacted up until now. She was regal; stunning in a way that made his heart ache. But there was resentment in the set of her lush mouth and a tightness to her jaw and eyes that made him suspect that if she could trade her beauty for a normal life she would have done so in a second.

Who could blame her? Malfoy had coveted her all this time. Neville knew he was not so vain that he had become interested in Hermione only for her looks; the both of them were clever, sometimes ruthless individuals with a dislike for failure. They would have been well matched had Draco never been born in a figurative viper’s nest, and even then, Neville

doubted Hermione would have given him the time of day had he actually courted her like a normal person.

"I'm sorry to intrude," he said. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"He usually puts me under a sleeping charm when he does that," she said, gesturing to the bed. "At my request. He likes me to wake up and see the aftermath. It's different now."

Now Neville's face had gone white.

"I'm sorry—"

"Don't," she said stiffly. "It's too late for any of that. It is what it is."

Her hand came up to her throat.

"Of *course* he wanted you to witness it up close." Her tone was bitter. "He does love to flaunt his depravity."

Only the trails of blood had remained. She cast another charm to scrub them off her skin.

Neville hesitated.

"My Lady, if not vampires, then what?"

"I don't know," she admitted with a small shake of her head. "Even he doesn't—or he *claims* not to. But I've felt no effects from his bites, and he has no other traits to confirm him as one."

She opened her mouth briefly, looking pensive, shut it for a brief second, then spoke again. Gestured to the windows. She stood half-covered in a beam of light and yet seemed perfectly at ease.

"See?" she asked.

Neville couldn't make sense of it. People didn't just randomly turn into blood-suckers and yet not be vampires at the same time.

"It shouldn't have surprised me that he's turned out that way," she said. "He always did have a fixation with blood, even before the Horcruxes. He was always a monster—it's only fitting his physical form is starting to reflect that. I just didn't expect it to happen to me, too."

Neville stared.

"The Horcruxes..." he said hoarsely.

"We both have one," she said. "I refused. He didn't listen."

Neville couldn't help the pity in his eyes as he looked at her.

She gave him a challenging look in turn.

"You think this is bad?" she said. There was anger belying her calm tone. Her posture was stiff. "You don't know the half of it. But you will. He'll make sure you see all of it. Maybe he wants a reaction from you. I'm not sure he cares anymore. I just think he wants you to see how thoroughly you've lost. He loves to flaunt me in front of others just to flex his power."

“Hermione—”

“Address me properly,” she hissed, “or you will be punished.”

Neville flinched, his eyes wide. “F-Forgive me, my Lady.”

“Not by me,” she added after a pause. “By him. I couldn’t care less about being addressed that way. But if he catches you slipping up, he *will* punish you.”

“Of course, my Lady,” Neville said, bowing his head.

She’s gone, he reminded himself, trying not to acknowledge the hurt that stung at him. *Remember that. She’s gone.*

Lord Malfoy was seated at his desk, dressed in robes of ink-black that flowed to the floor. His eyes were neutral but his mouth was smiling as he regarded Theo, who approached him cautiously.

“Good morning, my Lord,” Theo said, bowing deep. He withdrew an ancient scroll from within his robes and held it before him. “I’ve brought the deed to my estate in Moscow.”

He rose, came to the desk and placed it in Draco’s waiting hand. “I relinquish it to you.”

Draco unrolled it, careful with the crumbling corners. His eyes scanned over it quickly.

“Rest assured I will treat your home with the respect it deserves,” he said, looking up to meet Theo’s eye. “Its import is not lost on me. You made a great sacrifice to satisfy my whim, and you’ll be repaid handsomely.”

There was a loud, sudden THUNK as a huge sack full of what could only be coin landed on Draco’s desk, appearing from thin air. It opened itself to reveal glittering galleons within—a small fortune.

“My Lord,” Theo said, staring at the sack in shock. “You are most generous.”

“Not that you really need the gold,” Lord Malfoy said with a raised brow. “But you’ve impressed me with your work. Thanks to your doings at the *Prophet*, no one knows the truth of what happened at Knockturn Alley.”

He gestured to that day’s issue of the newspaper lying to his right.

“I don’t usually keep copies,” he said, a quirk in his lip. “Only the notable ones. This will join my collection.”

Theo bowed his head in thanks.

Now Lord Malfoy leaned back in his chair, his pale eyes gleaming.

“I take it my wife was the catalyst to your making the decision.”

Theo fidgeted, unable to help himself. Lord Malfoy’s eyes locked onto the movement—like a shark stalking its prey.

“She is a hungry little thing, I’m learning. I assume she took liberties, did she not? Or was that someone else’s blood all over her? Were you ever going to mention it?”

Theo had gone very pale. Sweat beaded along his hairline.

“My Lord, I—” he swallowed again. “She insisted— I tried to deny her.”

Lord Malfoy held up his hand, silencing him. His smile was caustic.

“I don’t think you put up much of a resistance.”

Nott’s eyes were wide.

Lord Malfoy said nothing for a moment, merely staring at him. Nott seemed to want to disappear into the ground, stewing uncomfortably under his stare.

Good, Draco thought. Don’t get cocky just because she chose you as a distraction. Know your place.

He had half a mind to take back his word to Hermione and punish him. Killing him would take no effort. It might assuage his jealousy but how long until Hermione took another? How long would it take for her to realize he was right?

It was better not to tread too hard on her growing independence. If he loosed the leash all at once she would grow too comfortable and leave him for good. Draco would not let that happen. He would feed her in doses. Let her grow in confidence and power, yes by all means—but that didn’t mean she could leave him completely.

Sometimes he did miss the old days, where she had been shackled by his enchanted ring and bound to his every whim. She might have questioned and fought him at every turn, but he had held the upper hand the entire time. Easy as it was, he’d known even then it could not last forever.

Perhaps an Obliviate would suffice, since she didn’t do it, he thought to himself. He very seriously entertained the thought for a moment, all while Nott stood nervously before him, awaiting his sentence.

“I will forgive it,” he said at last with some difficulty. “I know my wife can be very tempting—I myself can never resist. She is an exquisite experience very, very few have ever had.”

His stare hardened.

“Did she fuck you?”

Not that he already didn’t know the answer. But it felt good to grill him.

Now Nott went red.

“She-she used her hand on me, my Lord.”

That eased Draco’s jealousy regardless. It was like a beast raging within him, demanding satisfaction. Hermione was *his*. But she was determined to have her silly little independence...

“Is that all?” he asked stiffly.

“She let me touch her chest,” Nott said. A visible drop of sweat fell from his jaw. “I used my mouth.”

“And that is it.”

“I swear it, my Lord.” He hastened to add. “She has Imperiused me so that I may only speak to you about it.”

Draco nodded. Clearly, her choosing not to Oblivate him indicated she wanted to do it again. Rage gnawed at him but he ignored it—for now.

“Remember from this point on,” he said, his voice clear with warning, “that she may dally with you if she wishes. I have given her that freedom so long as she remembers she is mine. I will not forbid you from fucking her—there is a lesson here she will learn in time, much as it displeases me to allow it.”

Nott was frowning in confusion, a weight slowly lifting from his shoulders.

“There are some things I *will* insist on: her womb will take only my seed. We’re trying to conceive again, and I won’t have her beget any bastards. Pull out or use a contraceptive spell—I don’t care as long as your spawn doesn’t grow inside her. She already knows these terms so there will be no trickery from you, or I’ll have your cock cut clean from your body.”

Nott nodded quickly, paler than ever. “Of course, my Lord.”

“You will hold your tongue and never speak to anyone of this affair on the pain of death. You will be discreet, and I will not have anyone else in this house save Pansy, perhaps, seeing what you to do together.”

“I would never,” Theo said, his heart hammering. “I would not dishonor my Lord and Lady in such a crass manner.”

“Yesterday was a day of celebration,” Lord Malfoy said. “And I would not have spoiled it by punishing one of my best. I meant to promote you last night, Theo. I had thought I would let you become one of my Eyes. Do you think, after what’s happened, that you’re still worthy?”

He cocked his head, watching the other man.

“I believe that is not for me to decide, my Lord,” Nott replied slowly. He feared Lord Malfoy’s question was a trap.

“I asked *you*.”

“I am your servant, my Lord,” Nott said. “I would do anything to please you, as I’ve proved today. I have great faith in you—more so than I had in Voldemort—to achieve what you say you will do. I’m not the only one with that sentiment.”

That pleased Draco—he had not expected to hear that.

“I am not worthy,” Nott said. “But my loyalty will never cease and I’ll always do my best to

Draco stared at him for another long moment.

“Come forward, then,” he said, his voice betraying no emotion.

With the events of the previous night’s celebration still heavy in the air, Hermione knew she should not have expected to see Martin in the library. Still, she went to check, feeling crestfallen at the sight of the large, empty room, the lonely canvas standing without being tended to.

Draco might have felt generous and given him the day off. She had seen Martin drinking at the feast—not as much as the others, but enough to warrant a rude awakening the following morning. She supposed many from the party would be nursing horrible hangovers—ones that potions could not completely eradicate.

For all that he had drank the night before, Draco had seemed not to feel a single ill-effect whatsoever. Nor did she. He’d been ravenous when they’d got to bed to the point that on several occasions she had to push him off or away for a moment to allow herself to recover, only for him to immediately dive back in. If her encounter with Nott had been the driving force behind the ferociousness of his actions he’d not indicated but Hermione couldn’t help but suspect it. She was sore everywhere in the most delicious way—but still, she found her thoughts straying back to Martin.

When Draco had had her on her side, one of her legs hoisted in the air and his cock plunging into her, she had pictured Martin instead, how he might grunt and groan with desire. When Draco had held her down and pleased her with his fingers she saw Martin’s kind blue eyes instead. She’d taken him in her mouth voluntarily, pretended it was not Draco there who gasped with pleasure and thrust into her mouth.

She’d come hard each time, screaming it out the last couple of times when her body could take no more. She could still taste Draco’s blood in her mouth and felt his come trickling out of her, his arms wrapping tight around her as she fell asleep, and wished she were in the library instead.

She wondered if he knew it was Martin she truly wanted, and not Theodore.

She left the unoccupied library behind her and chose to take a walk outside. Pansy had offered to go with her but Hermione declined.

Desire and hesitation clashed inside her as she walked.

She wanted Martin. Her hunger for him grew larger every day and now that she had the freedom to choose, it was difficult to contain. She felt optimistic that he returned her interest, that if she made an advance he would meet her halfway, and eagerly.

Then why wait? Asked the voice. Go to him. Have him.

Hermione ignored the voice, turning her head away.

If I do that then I’ll bring him deeper into this nightmare, she thought, conflicted. Draco will become jealous once he figures it out. He said he wouldn’t punish me, but he said nothing about punishing them.

That made her stop in her tracks—she was atop a hill, a high wind blustering past her, whipping at her cloak and hood.

I can't damn him to any of this.

The beast inside her disagreed.

He is already damned, most powerful one. You cannot save him. Worry not for his sake but yours. Life has not been kind to you. Be selfish. It is time to take, and ruin.

Fred already wanted her to kill him—if she was in some way responsible for Martin's death, too, however it came about, that was yet *another* body on her ledger. Martin was a good man. He was the opposite of Draco in every way—did goodness not deserve a chance to persevere?

Could she really let herself be so selfish? Life may not have been kind but that did not give her a reason to be cruel—at least, not to those who didn't deserve it. She hated Draco's followers, wanted none of them to look at her or speak to her but had to, unfortunately. They seemed so eager to win her favor. It was all so absurd. Every time she came out on Draco's arm she felt like she was stepping into a circus tent. He treated it all so seriously, too—it was his reality after all.

But it was never mine.

One day they would know the truth. Hermione would have her vengeance, and there would be nothing in the world that could ever compare to the sweet sense of justice she would feel when she carried it out. They would all pay, and just as they'd held no mercy for her, she would return the favor.

Power simmered in her hands.

Soon, the voice crowed in her ear. Your day will come soon. Let the ground open and swallow them all. Let the howling winds silence their screams. Blood will flow like wine. What destruction we shall wage!

There had been nothing much to do after Neville left the Lord and Lady's bedroom. He dutifully reported to Pansy in the nursery, where they had overseen Lucio's studies.

He was drawing now, a set of pastels at his side and a large sheaf of toned paper set before him, already covered in all sorts of sketches—each one affected with the clumsy charm of a youth's art. There were dragons and broomsticks and all sorts of other animals. He had even drawn a portrait of himself and his mother holding hands and bearing huge smiles, each one with stick-limbs and boxlike bodies. Now and then Pansy would tap on one drawing and ask him about it, and the boy would enthusiastically assign it its own story and setting. Neville only watched and said nothing.

That the boy was curious about his presence there was apparent—he kept stealing glances at him and once or twice he opened his mouth to say something or perhaps ask a question, but each time Pansy caught on and shushed him quietly.

Neville pretended not to notice. The less he knew about the boy or interacted with him, the better. He could not form an attachment to anyone here—not even Hermione.

She's gone, he reminded himself, his heart aching. *Accept it.*

The previous night was now a harrowing memory. She, perched on Lord Malfoy's lap, not looking miserable as he had expected, but calculating and cold and *happy*. It had shocked him—he had braced himself and it still shocked him. The sight of her drenched in blood, of her moans gently echoing around the room as she and Lord Malfoy had fucked on their throne in front of everyone... It had hurt to watch.

And that was exactly what Malfoy wanted.

They'd watched her start to feed on him—a ripple of shock had gone through the others watching. Some had been swayed by the public display to give into their baser desires.

An entire room without shame. Neville's head had spun to be in the thick of it.

This was the life she led now?

It had been a spectacular of horror. Someone had got hold of his arm briefly, tried pulling him in for something Neville did *not* consent to—he'd wrenched away, moved to the farthest end of the room. Couldn't bring himself to even look toward the throne again.

Was this what it was always like? He had wanted to ask Pansy but she also looked a little taken aback before managing to mask her expression.

'You'll learn to accept things as they go, here,' she'd told him later. 'Keep any judgement from your face or you'll pay for it.'

Well, she was a master at it, apparently—he expected he would learn much from her. *Had to*, or else risk Luna paying for his indiscretions.

He was taken out of his thoughts by Lucio putting his pastels down at last and hopping out of his seat, apparently concluding his drawing session. He milled about the nursery, bored, trying to decide what to do with his free time.

"Can I go outside?" he asked Pansy. "Can I take my broom?"

Pansy looked out the window. "It looks like rain. Your parents won't allow that."

The boy frowned. "But it isn't raining *now*."

"Why don't we go for a quick walk instead?" Pansy said. "A couple turns around the garden. Tomorrow, if the weather is clearer, you can fly as much as you like *after* lessons. Will that do?"

The boy agreed, and they set off to the garden.

The gardens were huge here. Neville eyed the area, scanning as many details as he could—it would serve him well to memorize the layout of the entire place as quickly as possible.

Lucio set off at a brisk pace, his cloak and scarf wrapped securely around him. He broke a short stick from a nearby bush and began to wave it around as though it were a wand. Neville and Pansy walked a few steps behind him.

“Last night—,” Neville began, but Pansy cut him off.

“Unusual,” she said, nodding. “Yes. Even for me.”

“What the hell’s happened to her?” he asked, unable to help the aggression in his tone. “She said they’ve got Horcruxes now. Is that true? How long have they had them?”

Pansy sighed.

“Look,” she said in a hushed voice, glancing at the boy to make sure he was not listening. “I don’t know how much of this I’m actually allowed to say. I’m only letting you know so you can accept it and keep bracing yourself, because it can’t be undone.”

Neville frown deepened, watching her. She glanced around them again, then back at the manor as if expecting to see Draco at one of the windows, watching.

She resumed walking, taking his arm in her own.

“You know what Horcruxes are, yes?”

Only too well. Neville nodded, his knees going weak, but he kept walking as if nothing were amiss only through sheer force of will.

Lucio had discovered a rabbit hiding beneath a bush.

“Come out, you rabbit!” Lucio called to the poor creature. “I’m not going to hurt you, silly.”

“When?” Neville asked, his voice hoarse.

“Months ago. Hers, anyway. He’s probably had his for a year if not longer. But since then, I’ve watched them both change.” She paused, forcing a smile as Lucio, who’d run ahead to wave his makeshift wand at the rabbit, caught their attention and pointed to it excitedly.

“They’ve both grown more violent,” Pansy said. ‘It worries me. My Lady has a shorter temper—physical transformations. It’s unsettling. Both their powers have grown exponentially. I knew my Lord had a taste for blood—I’ve had to tend to her after he drinks from her. I didn’t know she could do it too, until last night.’ She sighed. “She killed him a few times now—or tried to. In ways that no human can come back from. He always comes back. I expect it’s the same for her.”

Neville was pale, lost for words.

“They hide it all from Lucio. He knows the truth of their relationship now but that’s all they’ve allowed him.” Pansy sounded pained. “My Lady wants him to have as normal an upbringing as possible. My Lord wants the opposite, for him to be primed for power as early as possible. They fight over it constantly.”

Neville’s thoughts were still stuck fast on the Horcruxes.

“You’ve never seen what their Horcruxes are?” he breathed.

She made a face. “The dagger he made Hermione kill Danielle with—I thought that was hers. I can’t be sure, but I’m certain that Danielle’s sacrifice gave power to Hermione’s Horcrux, somehow. He alludes to the true Horcrux being another item, that it’s safely hidden

away. I don't ever think he'll reveal either of them, not to anyone. He knows it would be too great a risk after what happened to Voldemort.."

That was pragmatic enough. Neville sighed, bent his neck backward so he could look up at the grey sky.

"So there's nothing to be done, then. Neither can die."

"Neither can die," she echoed, and they kept walking after the merry Lucio, pretending as though nothing were amiss.

Neville was almost back to his own quarters when a tall figure crossed the hall, made him stop in his tracks.

Neville stared. George looked back at him solemnly.

"Hullo, mate."

Neville's expression matched his.

"When I saw you last night, I thought you were a ghost," Neville said slowly. "We'd heard the rumors of you working for him. We didn't want to believe them—it was easier to think you were dead all this time."

George nodded silently.

"I wanted to say something—"

"My Lord ordered me to keep my distance yesterday," George explained. "I believe he didn't want a confrontation in front of his guests. And you would have angered him if you'd left your post to seek me out."

Neville nodded, his face like stone.

"I shouldn't be so dismayed," he admitted, scrubbing one hand over his face. "He gets his claws into everyone, doesn't he? It was inevitable that I'd end up here... I think even I knew that."

"Seems that way." George hesitated for a moment. Dropped his voice low.

"She's alright," he said, and Neville understood at once that he was referring to Luna. "I've seen her. She's alive."

Hope lodged itself in Neville's throat so he could only nod his thanks. He wanted to ask if he could see her but knew George's answer—that was a request only Lord Malfoy could grant. And George was probably risking punishment if he dared tell him anything more about Luna.

Neville had already resolved to be good. To *obey*. Anything to see Luna again. He gave a shake of his head, trying to calm his heart. Gazed at his old friend, noted each and every change in him. He really seemed like a completely different person.

"I'd heard rumors you were alive but I thought he put them out to rattle me." His stare was grim. "Luna believed it all. I couldn't... How long have you been working for him?"

"A couple years. Maybe longer. I don't keep time very well. Makes the days pass faster. But I didn't live here until recently, at my Lord's request." He looked Neville over, as if trying to remember when he had seen him last. "It's good to see you."

Neville's lips twisted.

"Is it?"

And George huffed with an ironic laugh.

"Not really, no."

"Is Fred here, too?"

A shadow passed over George's face. "He's dead."

Now that was a true shock.

"I'm sorry," Neville said, and if he still sounded a little stiff it was perhaps because the sudden encounter had thrown him, and he wasn't sure what else to say now. "I really am. After the second battle, when we couldn't find your bodies, we assumed you were both gone, until the rumors started. I figured they meant it was *both* of you."

George looked as hollow as Neville felt.

"I agreed to serve Lord Malfoy to save ourselves from the situation we were in," he said. "Fred didn't quite agree with my decision, but he came, too... His definition of freedom was different to mine."

Neville wanted to ask what he meant about that 'situation' but George's demeanor indicated he was not willing to speak of it at present. He only nodded, disquiet wringing at this throat. Then George looked up, the grief in his eyes now masked.

"I heard what you did in Knockturn Alley."

His eyes were taking in Neville's new robes of servitude, the mark at his wrist.

Neville opened his mouth to explain, a deep and shameful heat burning at his ears, but George held up a hand, silencing him.

"You fit right in, here," he said. 'We've each of us that live here done horrible things. Even my Lady Hermione agrees—she says we are all monsters here.' He gave a dim smile. "I think the only innocent in this game is the boy. Pansy, too, probably. Most definitely, the painter."

Neville pictured Lucio, with that youthful innocence and that curious gaze. He could picture him in a decade's time, the spitting image of his father—and just as cruel. The thought filled him with dread.

"So you stay here?" he asked, to distract himself.

"From time to time, at my Lord's insistence," George said. "He keeps a close eye on me. I assume he didn't give you a choice, though, did he?"

There was a funny sort of look in George's face as he had said that last line. Neville watched him warily, sensing there was some sort of joke in there, but he couldn't understand where.

"Of course not," he said at last. "He plans to kill me once the novelty of having me as his servant wears off."

George nodded, the grim humor in his face now gone. They stared at each other for a moment.

When George spoke, his voice was so soft it might as well have been nothing but a gentle gust of air.

"At least you have that to look forward to."

Hermione was alone in another spare room, lingering by the window. She had been there long enough to watch Lucio, Pansy and Neville walking in the garden until the rain had begun to fall, and was still falling now.

She stood with her arm held up and bent at the elbow, making her talons extend and retract, making them sharper and then duller, marveling at this strange ability.

If she wanted vengeance, she had to train. She would not be restrained nor defeated. It was time to figure out the extent of her newfound powers.

Everyone within the manor was occupied with something else. It was no trouble to leave through the main entrance, a cloak clasped tight about her throat. Before anyone might see her, she darted outside and into the rain, into the nearest copse and pushed beyond, away from any eyes that might catch her from the windows of the manor.

It was wet and cold outside, with thankfully little to no humidity. As she breathed out, her breath plumed in the air around her. The sky was growing darker by the minute.

Do be careful, my love, came Draco's voice into her head, making her stop in her tracks. *I know you like to take your lonesome walks, but couldn't this one have waited?*

Irritation washed over her, but she forced it away. It would not do to snap at him now. He would only grow suspicious.

I felt so restless, she replied, putting her hand on the trunk of the closest tree. *I had to get outside despite the rain. I won't be gone long, my Lord.*

See to it that you don't, he said. *Else I'll think you've gone off to taste the local specimens.*

That actually made her laugh. At the same time, her hand unconsciously flexed, digging into the bark of the tree and going deep, embedding itself within as though the wood were nothing more than a pillow. She stared at it in astonishment, her face lit up with wonder. It hadn't hurt a bit. There was no blood anyway, no pulverized fingernails. Her heart rate sped up.

Will you come back in time for lunch? he asked.

No, Hermione replied. *I'm not hungry.*

Well, if you change your mind, you can always have a snack in bed later.

Hermione made a face.

I don't think I'm in the mood for leftovers.

Now it was his turn to laugh. He bellowed.

You delightful, silver-tongued witch, he said affectionately. *Go take your walk. Come back to me as soon as you can.*

Hermione rolled her eyes and closed the connection. The rain had lessened considerably—not that she'd felt it in the first place. Her cloak was charmed to repel it completely. She took off her hood and continued to plunge into the forests surrounding the manor.

25. The Vow

Thanks for your patience! Have some announcements featuring writing status for this fic and Sweet Sacrifice on my WordPress blog. You can find me under thewanderingdaughter. You'll know it's me when you find it. I'd link it here but FFnet still is a monster about sharing links so sadly, I can't.

The table had just been cleared of the remnants of their breakfast. Pansy was already walking away with Lucio, holding his hand, heading to the nursery so Lucio could begin his lessons. Draco remained in his chair and Hermione decided she would join Pansy and her son that morning so she rose and went in their direction.

As she passed Draco's seat his hand shot out, took hold of her wrist. Though he'd moved swiftly, there was no aggression in his demeanor, and his hold on her wrist did not hurt, but it was firm enough to force Hermione to stop short. The door shut behind Pansy.

"Yes, my Lord?" Hermione asked innocently.

What could he want now? They'd not had sex that morning, could that be it? He did so love to have her here once they were alone. Time after time he'd bent her over this very table and roughly fucked her, rattling the furniture around them. The heat in his eyes now was telling enough to make her insides squirm.

"Stay with me a while, my love," he said lightly, as if his eyes were not currently promising to devour her.

"I want to go with my son, my Lord," she said.

"Our son," he replied, pushing his chair back from the table so there was space to accommodate her as he pulled her into his lap. "You can spend more time with him when we're finished. Now oblige me, sweetheart. There's something important we must discuss."

He transferred his grip from her wrist to her throat, pulled her in for a deep kiss. She let his tongue in, let him ravage her mouth until he was satisfied and finally pulled back.

"What do you want to discuss?" she asked, a little out of breath. "If this is about Theo, I don't want to hear it. You never put restrictions on who I could choose, and I won't let you start that now just because you're jealous."

"I was... surprised... that you chose him," he admitted, a wry, humorous light in his gaze. "But I won't question it, even if I *am* jealous."

"I knew you would, be," Hermione asked with a disdainful sniff that made him smile. "You just can't help yourself, can you?"

"What is it you like about him?" he asked, genuinely curious.

"What did you want to discuss, Draco?" she answered pointedly.

Amused, Draco chuckled.

"You look beautiful this morning," he said, his eyes sweeping appreciatively over her. "You look beautiful always."

Hermione made herself smile. She slid her hand up his chest, admiring the feel of his prominent pectorals underneath his clothing. Repulsive though his personality was, she couldn't help but admire the exterior it was hidden under.

I can rip you open any time I please, she thought. And inspect every glistening, pulsating bit of you. Will I ever find decay?

"Thank you, my Lord," she murmured.

"Have you had any other troubling dreams lately?" he asked. He was a little distracted, as she still had her hands on him, running them back down to feel the ridges of his abdominal muscles through the fabric of his clothing.

Like marble, she thought. Hard and cold and perfect. Unreachable.

"None that I can remember."

"And no dizziness?" he asked. "No headaches, no trouble with your magic?"

Her hands stopped their curious roaming. Hermione studied him carefully for a second before answering. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as dread began to seep in.

Could he know? Might he suspect? Had he spied on her testing her powers last night? She thought she had gone far enough into the woods, used enough wards to shield herself. Was this him hinting that he had seen?

She decided to play innocent and shook her head.

"I've had no trouble, my Lord."

Now it was his turn to study her for a moment—she felt her breath hitch but remembered to stay relaxed so as to not give herself away. He didn't seem angry or exasperated, which gave her some relief. At last, he smiled.

"I'm pleased to hear it," he said. His hand on her hip was tight, squeezing her flesh. "Very pleased."

Hermione returned his smile, reached forward to brace herself against his chest. She could feel his heart beat under her touch.

It was a miracle he somehow didn't know already—if he knew she was lying and was playing him like a fool then it meant a harsh punishment later. But there was still the slim chance that she was just being paranoid, that she was over-analyzing his every action.

He squeezed her bottom, ran his hand along her thigh. Brought one her hands to his lips and kissed it.

"I've been worried that your strange sleeping spell would have lasting effects of some sort," he said thoughtfully. "Erik offered to study you, you know. Said he'd never seen a case as extreme as yours. I was panicked and I refused... I do regret that now. We might have

learned a lot had I allowed him. Then we might know better what happened to you: if it was a one-time occurrence, or if this is something we might expect again.”

Hermione had considered the possibility of it happening again, too. It had kept her awake at night, sometimes, as she’d pondered the strange turn of her magic. Her hands reflexively tightened on his chest in fear.

“I wish you had let him,” she said honestly. “I never want to go through that again. It’s bad enough to have your magic trapped inside of you for so long—it’s another thing entirely to be trapped inside yourself, not knowing how it happened or how to get out.”

Draco watched her, his brows bent. He cupped her face in his hands, made her look up at him.

“It won’t,” he insisted. “I won’t let it happen again.”

Hermione gave him a doubtful look. “You can’t be certain, Draco. You couldn’t help me the first time, remember?”

“You have your magic back,” he reminded her, almost stern. “I’ll never take it away again, my love. Not at the risk of losing you like that. I could have lost you for good.”

His hands were firm around her face and the look in his eyes was surprisingly earnest—Hermione still felt unsure.

“You swear it?” she asked. “You’ll never do it again? Even if you’re angry with me?”

“I swear it.” He paused, breaking eye contact for a moment to gather his thoughts. “For a moment that day, I really thought I’d lost you. I nearly lost control. Seeing you like that—that’s something I never want to go through again, too. I could hardly cope those first few days, knowing you were suffering and being unable to help.”

There was raw emotion in his eyes—a rare occurrence. Hermione stared at him, fascinated.

“I know I’ve put you through a lot,” he said. “And most of it I did intentionally. But locking up your magic—I never expected it to have an effect like that. I only did it in the first place to protect you and to keep you from harming yourself and me, and getting free. I never once considered it might have negative effects despite how long I kept you that way.”

He sounded convincing, but it wasn’t enough. He pulled her in for a kiss but she turned her head away. His lips pressed into her cheek.

“Make an Unbreakable Vow, then,” she breathed. “Prove it to me, my Lord.”

There was a pause. He seemed surprised.

“Don’t you trust me?” he asked slyly. A shiver ran through Hermione.

“Make the Vow,” she repeated. She trailed her hands from his chest to his throat. “You want to please me? Do it. If you mean what you just told me, this wouldn’t be an issue for you.”

“It isn’t an issue,” he said. He took her hand, looked her dead in the eye. “I’m prepared to prove myself to you, sweetheart. I told you we’re in a new phase in our relationship. Our trust must be mutual, and I’ll do what it takes to earn yours.”

Hermione hung on his every word.

“What is this new phase?” she asked.

“You’re ready,” Draco said, a grin revealing his sharp teeth. “I’ve trained you long enough, Hermione. You’ve been stepping into your role with me more and more, and I couldn’t be more proud. It suits you. You’ve changed, grown stronger. You’ve become what you were destined to become, sweetling: my Queen. You know your purpose—*our* purpose.”

“I wasn’t destined to become a Queen,” Hermione replied, looking at him indignantly. “I won’t be confined to a throne for the rest of my life. Because of your chains you made me a passive participant in my own life all these years—well, no longer.”

Draco tilted his head, studying her, a strange light in his eyes.

“Of course,” he said. “My little firebird is determined to break free of any cage.”

Hermione gave him a stern look.

He turned his head.

“Pansy,” he barked.

She appeared at once beside them, bowing.

“Yes, my Lord?”

“My wife demands me to make an Unbreakable Vow,” he said without looking away from Hermione. “Your assistance is required.”

Pansy glanced at Hermione, who gave a tiny nod of encouragement to reassure her.

“O-of course,” Pansy said.

Draco held up their joined hands. Pansy came closer, held out her own hand over theirs.

Hermione’s heart began to pound. She found herself a little tense, as though expecting Draco to break away laughing at any moment. But his eyes were intent on hers and he looked so serious it allowed her to relax slowly.

“I, Draco Abraxas Malfoy, do solemnly swear to my wife, Hermione Jean Malfoy, that I will never tamper with her magic. I do solemnly swear that I will never restrain it again, and it shall always be at her access for as long as we both live.”

A chain made of golden light emitted from Pansy’s palm. It lit up the space around them, casting a beautiful warmth over their forms. The chain lengthened as she moved, winding it around Draco and Hermione’s forearms several times over. It was light enough to float in the air, but as it coiled around their arms, Hermione felt its weight slowly increase.

“If,” Draco continued, “I ever break this vow, I will accept the punishment. Both from this vow, and from my wife.”

He winked at her as he said that last part. She felt a shiver of excitement wash over her as the Vow took shape.

“If my husband breaks this Vow,” Hermione said, “his punishment shall be that his own magic is contained inside him, unable to be used, just as mine once was. And it will remain that way for as long as I see fit.”

She half-expected him to cut it off then, to demand that they start it over. She gave him a challenging look, waiting for his response. If he meant to take this Vow seriously, was it not worth it to test his mettle?

Draco cocked his head, a gleam in his eye. He gave her a wicked grin.

“As we declare, it will be so,” he said. “May this Vow hold us true.”

“May this Vow hold us true,” Hermione repeated.

She had not expected him to do this so eagerly. The magic felt hot on her arm but did not hurt. By now it glowed so bright it stung at her eyes and made them water. Draco was also watching the process, but he looked up when he sensed her staring at him and held her stare.

Let this be a sign of my devotion, he said to her privately. I’ve learned from my mistakes, and I will do what it takes to keep you happy. I hope you appreciate this gesture, my love.

I do, my Lord, she replied. More than you know.

The chains were tightening, pressing into her forearm until she felt it would splinter her into pieces.

Pansy pulled her arm up sharply—the chain tightened around their arms one last time, glowing white-hot, and then imploded, scattering thousands of tiny motes of that gold light into the air, fading quickly and vanishing as they drifted down. The room shook a little—Hermione looked around, fearful she had caused it, but it ended as quickly as it had begun.

Hermione pulled her arm to herself, rubbing it, inspected her flesh for any trace of the spell. It had left none.

“Thank you, that will be all,” Draco said to Pansy, who bowed and left. Her face was carefully masked as usual, but as she was leaving again, Hermione caught her eye and saw a brief flash of bewilderment.

So I’m not the only one who was surprised, Hermione thought.

“Does that satisfy you, my Lady?” Draco was asking. He held her closer to him now, sniffing at her hair.

There was no anger in his eyes. But Hermione feared that he might be hiding resentment. He might want her to begin trusting him more but after years and years of his deceit and manipulation, it was proving to be a monumental task, no matter what promises he made.

Still, an Unbreakable Vow was a good step forward—but what threat could it really hold over his head to keep his word if he couldn’t die? Her only resort had been to turn her own treatment back onto him.

She almost *wanted* him to break the Vow now, so that her punishment could be enacted. Without magic, he would be utterly powerless and at her mercy. She wondered if that would

affect the Horcruxes at all-probably not. But she could make him every bit as miserable as she had been when he'd had her living without magic, and more.

But that would remain to be seen. For now, he appeared in earnest. Time would tell whether it would last. The fact remained that this was quite a generous gesture on his part.

Time to play nice.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, kissed him with what she hoped passed as passion. His arms came around her in turn, one hand cradling the back of her head.

"I didn't think you would actually do it," she confessed when they broke apart for air. "It pleases me immensely, my Lord."

"Good," he said. He did seem at ease, but that hunger was in his eyes still as he looked at her.

She let him snog her for a bit longer. He was insistent, greedy as always. His mouth marked up her throat, traveled slowly down towards her chest, but to her surprise, he stopped himself.

"Since this is already such a happy day, let's continue it. We deviated a little from my intentions for this conversation, but I'll approach it again, more bluntly this time: I've given you the time you requested to recover from your sleeping spell. You just told me you've had no more issues. You know what I want."

Hermione's heart sank. She had been so worried about him knowing about her increasing powers that she hadn't considered the fact that he'd want to breach this subject again so soon.

"Don't look that way," he said before she could speak. He raised his hand to brush at her mouth. "You promised, sweetheart, and if we're going to trust each other, I think it's important you keep your word. You've put this off long enough."

"My Lord," she said, taken aback, trying to delay, to think of another excuse, but failing miserably.

Draco took her chin in his hand.

"I made an Unbreakable Vow to please you," he said. "I don't think I'm asking too much from you now, am I?"

Her hands itched to transform, to spear into his throat and rip out his spine.

You smug, conniving bastard.

Anger wrapped a haze around her mind, clouding her judgement. His eyes were gleaming, knowing he had snared her in a trap of her own making.

He had a point. She'd made a (mostly unwilling) promise. Although she hadn't intended to keep it, at this point it would be too dangerous to continue to deny him, especially after the two boons she'd been granted (rather, demanded for herself). It would not do to spit in his face now lest he change his mind. Not when she'd come so far, and still had such a long way to go.

Theirs was a very tentative peace and Hermione had learned at last the power and struggle of choosing the right battles. It was very likely that Draco had allowed her the freedom to choose other bed partners outside of their marital bed so he could hold it over her head later to grant himself this. She might have suspected that from the beginning, but she well and truly had expected him to fight her and contain her only to his bed.

They were in a new phase, he'd told her. She should have taken that literally, for he was proving himself different to how she'd grown to know him. This was too many surprises in such a short span of time... it made her uneasy.

Hermione closed her eyes so she didn't have to see his face. Let the anger ebb slowly until the red faded from her vision. Draco waited patiently, having sensed her rage, wondering if she would lash out. Instead, she surprised him by opening her eyes, looking calm again.

"I'll keep my word," she finally said. "You granted me my wish, so I'll try to grant yours. For Lucio's sake."

That pleased him very much, as she had intended. Draco smiled beatifically and held her to him tightly in a crushing embrace.

"I'm overjoyed to hear it, my love."

A shiver erupted under her skin, rolling down her body.

"Starting from now we will be trying for another," he ordered. He reached to undo the dress she wore underneath her robe. "I don't care if you've had your plaything when I call for you. I will expect you to make yourself available for me, so we can get the results we want as quickly as possible. You may have your lover, but remember I will always be your main priority."

His hands were on the neckline of her dress, splitting it down the middle. He stared at her nude body, his cock stirring in his trousers.

"I will have *life* in this house."

Hermione thought of poor, lonely Lucio. He would be beyond happy to have a sibling. It was only for him that she resisted the urge to struggle.

If I give him this, I can keep my secrets secure for longer.

There was a whirl of movement as Draco Apparated them to the dining hall, where he carried her back to the throne, sat her down onto it, and grabbing her by the hips, made her slide forward so that she sat closer to the edge of the seat, and he made her lean back and spread her legs, kneeling on the floor to settle between them.

"Fertile is the soil," he murmured along her thighs, nibbling gently as he came closer to her core. "And plentiful is the seed. What glorious fruit we'll bear, Hermione."

He took his time, licking her ravenously, moaning into her flesh, his cock hard and leaking with desire. Hermione held nothing back from him and moaned and cried out in pleasure, clutching at his hair, pressing him closer to grind against his face. When she finally convulsed underneath him, her expression one of heavenly torment, Draco pushed his fingers inside her and pumped away to prepare her, causing her to come again instantly. He kissed her as she

panted through her second release, his tongue lapping up the beads of sweat cropping up along her throat.

When he could deny himself no longer Draco joined her on the throne, holding her on his lap facing him, and sat her down on his cock impatiently, causing her to arch her back into him, her breath to come out in shallow gasps. Leaning far back into his seat, he held her in place around the waist and fucked her ferociously, snapping his hips upwards to fill his wife over and over, watching her hand pleasure her clit as he did so until she fell apart one more time with a choked scream and he finally came inside her, a primitive snarl ripping out from his throat. She could feel every twitch and throb of his cock as he emptied himself inside her and closed her eyes, hoping with all her might that none of it would take.

“Draco,” she moaned, clutching at him, leaning against him, too weak to support herself on her own. He filled her completely, his hand taking over where hers had fallen away over her clit, and she dared not move for fear of another overwhelming climax. Her thighs shook uncontrollably. “My Lord...”

He kissed her shoulder, her breast, her nose. He was still inside her, still hard, ready to go again. Could feel the hot rush of his seed flow from her, trickling down onto the seat of the throne.

“Yes, my love?” he murmured into her skin. His hands were on her stomach, caressing her. One parted to cup her breast. “Do you want more? Tell me.”

He was circling her clit, using her slickness to rouse her desire again. It was working, despite her exhaustion. She halted him, buried her face into his neck.

“What if the Horcrux corrupts any other children we have?” she asked, shaking under his touch. “What if we bring something awful into the world?”

He pondered it briefly.

“There’s no other way to find out than to try, sweetling, you know that,” he replied, stroking her back. “Whatever comes, we’ll deal with it together. Anything or anyone that poses a threat to our, but most especially, *your* safety, will be eliminated.”

“You’d kill your own child?” she asked, turning pale.

“Don’t look so far into the future,” he said. “That’s my job, sweetling. I want you to focus on the *present*.”

He applied more pressure as he spoke the emphasized, and Hermione buckled, moaning.

“We don’t know for sure what will happen,” he said. “You say ‘corrupt’. I think you should look at it differently-if our future children are *blessed* with the powers of our Horcruxes, don’t you think that would be remarkable?”

He slid two fingers inside her now-Hermione clutched his shoulders, her mouth parting as he began to pump them inside her.

“But you’d still eliminate it, if it posed a threat,” she said.

He chuckled.

“You still haven’t learned, have you, Hermione?” he asked, gently curling his fingers inside her. “There’s no room for emotion considering survival. You do what you must, and then you keep going.”

Lucio scribbled messily on a scrap piece of parchment, watching in satisfaction how each line he made crossed over each other. He did it again and again and again, not quite sure why aside from the fact that he rather liked the sound, and it was interesting to see how quickly he could create a mass so opaque and so large that there was no opportunity to see the individual strokes that made up the whole. The process was oddly soothing, and he’d already filled a number of pieces of parchment with this nonsensical mess.

Mummy sat beside him, reading from a book, one hand absently toying with a lock of his hair. He didn’t mind—he sensed somehow that it gave her comfort, and he did not want to make her feel bad by pulling away. Besides, it made his scalp tingle and he liked that.

“Mummy,” he said suddenly, still scribbling.

She put a finger between the pages of her book to mark her place and looked at him.

“Yes, darling?”

“Neville is a bad man,” he said. “Because of what he did.”

He halted his quill, turning to look at her. Fresh ink smeared along his palm, staining his skin.

“Yes.”

“He killed lots of people.”

She nodded somberly.

Lucio was frowning.

“Why did Father bring him here if he’s dangerous? Don’t bad people go to prison?”

She took a moment to reply.

“Not all of them,” she said. “Sometimes there is no justice, and bad people get to go on with their lives. It isn’t fair, but it happens.”

He took a moment to contemplate this.

Lucio looked so serious for someone so young. She hated having to tell him this, but it was part of life, and necessary to understand if he was one day going to look back at his childhood and his relationship with his father.

“It’s his punishment, darling,” she continued in a soft voice. ‘Your Father is punishing him by making him work here for him. Neville can’t use his magic freely and he can’t escape.’ She set her book face down onto the table. “It’s almost the same thing he did to me. I’ve never been to prison, but I can tell you living as your father’s hostage for so long feels worse than what I imagine being a real prisoner to be like in many ways.”

“Father said Neville is his enemy,” Lucio said. “Does he want to hurt us?”

“No,” Mummy said at once. “The only one he wanted to hurt was your father.”

“Why does he hate father?”

Mummy sighed, rubbed at her forehead. She looked so tired suddenly that Lucio almost regretted asking.

“Because Neville and I were once very close friends, and he knew what your father did to me,” she explained patiently. “He wanted to avenge Harry and I.”

“Your friend Harry?” Lucio asked, faintly remembering that name she’d uttered few times before. She nodded.

Lucio finally set his colored pencil down.

“I don’t want to grow up,” he said, looking down at his work, a knot forming in his stomach. “Every grown-up I know is unhappy.”

Mummy scooted close and wrapped her arms around him, holding him tight. Lucio buried his face into her shoulder. Her scent was so familiar and comforting—he breathed it in but it did little to calm his sudden upset. She was crying but he couldn’t see it from how closely she held him.

“One day,” she was whispering, “I’ll get us out of here and you’re going to see what life can really be like. This is no place for children. I don’t want you to grow up molded by what you’ve seen here. You deserve to live your life free of your father’s expectations, full of happiness and light.”

Her words sent a wave of uncertainty over Lucio—she sounded so urgent and serious that he believed her. But—she wanted to leave Father? That part frightened him.

Scary as he was, Lucio could not imagine living without his father. Even if he had been horrible to mummy, as she’d told him. Conflict gnawed at his heart.

“Wh-where would we go?” he asked, his voice small.

“I don’t know yet,” mummy whispered back. “I’ll figure it out. But you can’t stay here. Your father will train you to become as cold and cruel as he is, and it’ll break my heart to see.”

She let him go, inspected his face and saw the worry in his eyes.

“It’s okay to be scared,” she said, cupping his cheek. “And it’s okay to cry if you need to.”

“You want to leave father,” he said, wiping at his eye.

She looked so sad.

“You’ll understand fully when you’re older,” she said. “I can’t burden you with everything now—I refuse to do that to you. But one day, I’ll tell you our story in depth and you’ll learn why you’re better off without him.”

Pansy met Neville outside Draco's study.

"Is there something to do?" he asked, seeing her expectant expression.

She shook her head. "My Lord hasn't said anything?"

Now it was his turn to shake his head.

"A lot of this job is just standing and waiting around, it seems," Neville said tonelessly.

Pansy nodded slowly, staring off into the distance. "You'd be surprised how busy it can get at the most unexpected moment."

After she had left Lucio with Pansy and Neville, Hermione found Martin in the library, standing before his canvas like always. She saw him there and hesitated at the door, a thrill running through her, and observed him for a moment before stepping into the room. He was so engrossed with his craft that he didn't hear her enter, only startling when the door closed behind her.

Their gazes locked—Hermione felt her stomach swoop.

There was a tinge of red about his face as he looked at her.

"Good day, my Lady," he said, smiling a little nervously.

"Hello," she said, her voice quiet. She approached him.

Martin cleared his throat.

"That was quite the celebration the other day," he said. "I had the most wretched headache the morning after."

Hermione smiled.

"You and just about everyone else who attended."

He laughed.

Hermione clasped her hands behind her back—she wanted so badly to reach out and touch him.

"I didn't get a chance to speak with you then," she said. "But I was very pleased you came after all."

"I'm glad to have pleased you," he replied with a bow of his head. Now his eyes couldn't meet hers.

Hermione stepped closer, unable to help herself. He went still, looking at her feet, and realizing belatedly with some surprise that they were bare.

"I hope I didn't frighten you too much."

He swallowed, finally met her eyes. Hermione's control slipped—she reached out and touched his arm despite her better judgement. Through his jumper she could feel lean, solid muscle underneath. How intriguing.

"I thought I should let you know that Draco and I aren't vampires."

There was a trace of fear in his eyes, poorly hidden.

Hermione liked that.

"That is—that's a relief to hear," he murmured, distracted by her touch. It was as if a current of electricity ran from her fingertips, injecting itself directly into his veins.

Hermione dropped her voice low. Something inside her was screaming at her to get even closer, to pull him to her, to grab the back of his neck and bend his head down to meet her lips.

Step away from him, she tried to tell herself. *Don't give in.*

"Those events are largely performative for me," she whispered. "Pleasing Draco is unfortunately the best method to get what I want."

He looked a little concerned, leaning in and not realizing it, too caught in the web of her gaze.

"What is it you want, my Lady?" he asked.

They were both engrossed in each other's lips. Hermione flicked her gaze up to meet his, and he got her meaning. His thoughts shorted out briefly and he stumbled a little.

Cold clarity hit her then, pulling her out of her thoughts.

Hermione bit back a sigh and looked away, disappointed with herself. The beast inside her roared with displeasure, having been poised to sink its teeth into Martin.

"I'm sorry," she said a little unsteadily. "I'm being too forward. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

She wrapped her arms around herself, shaken. So much for her resolution. She'd nearly broken it just now. How could she do such a thing? Nott was an easy mark and she could mess with him without guilt because he was deeply entrenched in Draco's doings. Martin, however, was innocent.

He was looking at her curiously.

"I'm not uncomfortable," he said, taking a half-step forward. "Far from it."

Get back, she wanted to warn. *Don't come any closer. I won't be able to help myself if you do.*

Her lips never formed the words.

He took another step closer.

"This was unwise," she muttered to herself. "I shouldn't have come."

But she made no move to leave the room.

"Won't you stay?" Martin asked. He seemed a little crestfallen. "Your company is always welcome to me, my Lady."

Hermione bit her lip. “As is yours.” She looked away, suddenly nervous. “I was eager to see you again after the night of the feast.”

“Really?” he asked, and she nodded.

“I have to be careful,” she said, keeping her voice soft and low. “I don’t want Draco to know I want you.”

She had to speak plainly—what else was there to do? Perhaps that boldness would unnerve him, push him away. But she didn’t want to waste any more time.

“Would it put you at ease if I told you I want you too?” he asked, and there was conflict warring with the desire in his eyes. “But perhaps you’re right. Perhaps this is unwise. Lord Malfoy will have my head if he knew. And I shudder to think what he may do to you.”

“Don’t worry for me,” Hermione said, touched. “I can bite him back, now. He’ll respect my choice and not interfere.”

Martin still looked unsure.

“He always acts so possessive of you,” he said. “Why change now?”

“It’s a new development in our marriage. A strange one—but I don’t care if it means I have the freedom to choose. After years of him putting himself first, he says he wants to keep me happy. You have my word that he won’t interfere.”

He seemed greatly relieved to hear it.

Hermione wanted to touch him again, to trace that square jawline, to run her hands through his hair. She pictured Draco—broad and packed with muscle. All sharpness and malice. The polar opposite of the man who stood before her now.

“Did you enjoy the show at the feast?” she asked suddenly.

He choked, looking up at her in shock, red flooding his face.

“The show...” he said, looking dazed.

Hermione gave him a meaningful look, as if to say, *‘you know what I mean.’*

It was clear that he did.

Hermione got close to him again.

“When I was on his lap, I was pretending it was you,” she whispered into his ear, and felt him shudder. “I wanted it to be you.”

“My Lady, I—”

“Have you thought of me, too?” she asked, taking one last step to press herself against him, place her hands flat on his chest despite her own conscience screaming at her not to.

Martin’s hands went hesitantly to her waist and Hermione pressed her cheek against his shoulder.

“Yes,” he said, sounding tortured. He swallowed. “Of *course*. From the day I met you. I knew it was wrong. I tried to stop.”

“Don’t,” she murmured, breathing in his scent. He smelled of paint, of old paper. “I demand you to continue. I want you to think of me freely and without fear.”

Hermione took one of his hands, moved it along her form, encouraging him to explore. He caught on and did so, acquainting himself intimately with her curves. When he was too shy Hermione put her hand over his and made him squeeze. His eyes were star struck.

She could feel the bulge growing in his trousers and smiled.

She led his hand back up and to her breasts, and he cupped one, squeezed it firmly. He was so tentative, so careful were it not for her encouragement.

She reached up, caught his face in her hands—the nervousness was gone from his eyes and now only desire shone in them as he looked at her. The look quite transformed him. It was exhilarating—she found herself short of breath from anticipation. Hermione was pulling him in for a kiss when there was a knock at the door and Pansy entered. Martin froze.

If Pansy was surprised by what she saw, she gave no reaction whatsoever, nor was it apparent in her tone when she spoke.

“My Lady,” she called, “Theodore Nott is here to see you. He is in the drawing room.”

Hermione sighed in disappointment. Martin was wide-eyed and guilty, staring right at Pansy, who allowed him a tiny smile before her lips went straight again.

“Is he not here to speak with Draco?” Hermione asked.

“No, my Lady,” Pansy replied. “He says he came to inquire after you.”

Damn Theo. She had seen the adulation in his eyes and preened, had not realized how his eagerness might negatively affect her in other aspects.

Martin had almost completely been seduced—she’d had him in the palm of her hand. Need pulsed between her legs. She supposed she might order him to stay and wait for when she was done with Theo, but by then Draco might have returned and found him, and would become suspicious, and she wanted to keep him in the dark for a little longer. It didn’t matter if he knew about or saw her using Theo—but Martin was different. That was something she wanted to keep to herself for as long as possible.

She knew Draco didn’t view Theo as a threat. Nor was Martin, really, but in regard to him there was some bit of genuine feeling on her part, whereas Theo was just for amusement, and that made all the difference. *That* was most likely to waken Draco’s rage, and she feared it might provoke him to rescind their pact.

“Does Draco know he’s here?”

Pansy nodded.

“He is always kept apprised of who enters or leaves the manor,” she said.

Good, Hermione thought.

“Thank you, Pansy,” Hermione said. “I’ll go to him in a moment.”

“Of course, my Lady.”

The door closed as Pansy left.

The moment was lost. Hermione let Martin go.

“You’ll be here tomorrow?”

“Yes,” he said, looking as though he was still trying to determine if everything that had just happened was real. He pointed to where Pansy had just stood. “Will she not tell him?”

“She won’t,” Hermione said. “Pansy is an ally.”

Reassured, Martin came up to her a little apprehensively, taking her face in his hands.

“I’m sorry,” Hermione found herself muttering, leaning into his touch.

“What for?” he asked, puzzled.

She didn’t answer. He waited to see if she would, but she remained silent.

“I look forward to seeing you every day I’m here,” Martin breathed. “You’re the hope of spring in the dead of winter.”

And he kissed her, to Hermione’s delight.

He was gentle and slow, exploring her lips delicately. Hermione, still burning inside, returned the kiss with a hunger that spurred him to match hers. She clutched at his shoulders and brought him closer, closer, until they were mashed together. There was nothing cruel in his kiss. Hermione opened her mouth, let her tongue taste him, and he moved with her, marking her with his saliva. He felt so good against her. She didn’t want him to leave. The kiss muddled her thoughts in a pleasing way, and if it hadn’t been for the unexpected caller in the other room she would have been content to stay there in the library with Martin for much longer.

They had to break apart for air or risk collapsing. Hermione couldn’t help her smile. It was the most alive and buoyant she’d felt in a long time. Martin seemed dazed and heavily aroused behind his grin. Her lips in turn felt tender, delightfully claimed. He pressed his forehead to hers and Hermione stayed that way, reveling in this new connection until it was finally time to pull herself away and leave him there.

There would have to be some ground rules set with Theo, because while Hermione was happy to use him as a plaything, she now had Martin, too. She would not have any future moments with Martin cut short as this one had been by the over eager Theo, and she made a mental note to share all this with him at the earliest convenience, but by the time she’d reached the drawing room her irritation had washed away and she could only focus on the desire that still gnawed at her.

Theo bowed deep at her entrance and kissed her hand, made general inquiries and small talk of the weather and the news and such. Hermione barely paid attention, too distracted by the warm flush about his neck from the cold outside, the way he breathed so shallowly the closer she got to him.

"A most beautiful day, my Lady," he said, gesturing to the window. "But not half as beautiful as you."

Hermione fought the urge to roll her eyes.

"I don't believe I called for you, Theo," she said, and began to circle him slowly.

"You did not," he agreed, turning red. "Forgive me, my Lady—I could not stop thinking of you. If my visit displeases you, I'll leave at once."

Hermione tilted her head, assessing him.

"You might as well stay," she said. "I thought after last time, I might have scared you away."

"I am yours, my Lady," he said, and swallowed. "To do with as you please."

That was most welcome to hear. Hermione suppressed a smile.

"I'm not particularly thirsty today," she remarked. "But since you're here offering yourself I might as well drink."

Already, he was reaching for his cloak to shrug it off—she made a gesture, halting him in his tracks.

"You're so eager," she murmured approvingly. What a rush of power that gave her. "You're not afraid at all?"

Theo shook his head and Hermione leaned in so close her breath fanned over the skin of his neck.

"Not even if I can't help myself, and drain you completely?"

Gooseflesh rolled in a wave over his skin. She watched, fascinated.

"If it will please you then I'll accept my death happily," he said, and then smiled wryly. "Perhaps it might please my Lord, as well."

"I'll be careful," she promised, reaching up to pull him closer. "We've only just begun—why end the fun so soon? As for Draco, it might appease his jealousy for a moment, *but* he will lose one of his most valuable men, and we can't have that."

Not yet.

They were pressed so close together that Hermione could feel his erection. He was sweating, staring at her lips longingly. Hermione couldn't help but marvel at his subservience—if she asked him to crawl around the floor like a pup begging for a treat, he'd do it, no doubt. The way he looked at her with such devotion already was a little startling, truth be told. She knew he'd wanted her for some time, and knew the weighty honor of the attentions of a woman of her position, but could there be something in her bite that affected him? And if that was so, could it affect Draco, too? And even Martin?

There were so many unknowns here. It wasn't as if she could run to the library and find a book with the answer easily as she'd once done at Hogwarts. It filled her with disgust and rage to think of Voldemort, but he was the only other being she could think of whom had

Horcruxes, and *seven* of them, to be exact. He'd clearly been affected by them to the point of his physical appearance altering and his powers growing—but to what extent? Had he experienced what she and Draco were going through now?

Bellatrix might know—she had been disturbingly close to Voldemort. But Hermione had no desire to speak to her. Bellatrix had lost what was left of her sanity after Voldemort's death and had stayed largely inactive and isolated all during Draco's rise to power. She'd been violently wrathful upon being informed of Draco and Hermione's marriage, and although she'd never made any threats of harm, she'd voiced her disgust and thrown tantrums at the match between her other insane ramblings, and Hermione hadn't needed to insinuate to Draco that she never wanted to be in the other woman's company. Draco hardly spoke to his aunt unless he absolutely needed to, and he made sure she was well taken care of but left her alone in her withered house, presumably waiting for the day she died. Hermione had never expressed gratitude for that, but he'd sensed it all the same.

Therefore, asking Bellatrix was out of the question.

Voldemort had been only one person—but she and Draco were a pair, forever linked through their marriage and their combined Horcruxes. How did that affect the equation? Was it a benefit or a detriment?

Theo was still there in her grasp, waiting for her to move.

Well. With no one else to consult about this, there was only one thing to do. Press forward, and conduct the study herself.

She made sure to shut and lock the doors first and then pushed Theo onto the nearest couch. He stumbled backwards, landing heavily onto it. He righted himself quickly, and there was not anger in his eyes but excitement.

First she busied herself with ridding him of unnecessary layers, working to expose his chest and throat, using her other hand to touch him all over and work him up. He responded eagerly, leaning into her touch. She kissed only his throat, nipping and sucking at it as she had done only two days prior while his hands roamed over her with her encouragement.

"Next time, you'll wait for me to summon you," she said into his ear as her hand stroked his cock over his trousers. "Am I understood?"

"Yes," he gasped. "Forgive me, my Lady."

She licked the shell of his ear.

"What did Draco promote you to?"

She was reaching inside his trousers now—he hastened to unbutton them to give her better access. Once done, she wrapped her hand around his heated cock and gave him a stroke. He bit his lip and groaned loudly.

"He made me one of his Eyes," he said, his voice hoarse. "A higher distinction, I couldn't have hoped for."

"And did he join your sights?" she asked, using her thumb to delicately trace every bit of the head of his cock. Theo closed his eyes and panted—his hips bucked upwards into her hand. He nodded with a jerk of his head.

How very predictable. Knowing that she was using him, of *course* Draco would want to surveil their actions the best way he could: through his newest puppet.

Two can play your game, my Lord.

Hermione muttered a spell to undress herself, and she sat upon his lap, holding him to her, letting him explore her with his hands and mouth. Nott was eager, but not in the ruinous way she was used to with Draco. He squeezed and nibbled and licked and sucked but never bit down sharply, never sought to leave marks or bruises or blood.

After a moment, she let him go abruptly and lay back on the armrest, her hand between her legs, toying with herself.

“Give me your tongue,” she ordered, and he obeyed at once, positioning himself on the couch to fit between her legs.

He set to work hungrily, almost to a comical degree, wanting to prove himself worthy. Hermione bit back a smirk and threaded her fingers through his hair, pressing him in closer. His actions were sure and almost practiced, as if he had walked through this in multiple fantasies. She didn’t mind.

He was good. Serviceable. Hermione closed her eyes and let herself relish the sensations of his tongue on her. Her other hand went to her breast and played with it gently.

Draco, she called, where are you?

His response came at once.

In my study, dearest. I had some paperwork to look over.

I missed you, she lied.

I heard Nott came to see you, came his amused reply. *You’re with him, aren’t you?*

Nott sucked at her clit—her hips bucked and she moaned aloud. He did it again for longer and she let out a breathless whine.

“Yes,” she said to Nott. “Just like that.”

I hope he minds my rules, Draco warned, having heard. *Or there will be consequences.*

Why don’t you take a look to make sure he does? She asked.

He didn’t answer, but Hermione caught Nott’s flinch, could see how his left eye went from dark brown to icy grey in one blink. His eyes were intently focused on where his tongue worked but more often than not they looked up to watch her reaction. She favored him with heated look, encouraging him—and at the same time taunted Draco as he stared at her through Nott’s eye. Hermione was sure he could see her wetness, her body clenching.

My, but he’s so gentle, Draco remarked, amused. *I suppose that’s better for me—he knows to leave it to the husband to take a woman properly.*

Contrary to your belief, I don’t always want to be mauled from head to foot, Hermione said dryly.

He only chuckled in response.

I don't think that's true, he said, and his arrogance made her clench her jaw.

She was close already, thanks to her encounter with Martin. Theo was working her slowly, his hands flat on her inner thighs, searing her with his heat. Now and then he paused to regain his breath, to kiss around her lips or nuzzle her thighs. That would have been pleasing any other time but it was not what she wanted now. Hermione pushed her hips into him, moaning.

She hadn't yet closed the connection. Draco could hear it all.

Have you told him how rough you always need it when you're this close?

Annoyance bit at her. Hermione massaged Nott's scalp briefly—he was breathing hard, his tongue still slaving away. His stubble tickled her inner thighs and she sucked in a shallow breath as he sucked on her clit again.

"I'm close," she panted.

His pace increased. Hermione's nerves flared with pleasure—she found herself almost ordering him to go faster. But then Draco would hear, and he would boast afterward that he knew her best, that he'd been right.

"No," she said suddenly. Slow down."

Nott obeyed. His hands were tight on her thighs, spreading her open. Every stroke of his tongue was a push closer to the edge, and within moments she came, her eyes squeezed shut and her hips grinding into his mouth.

Nott cleaned her up with his tongue happily, moaning, grinding his erection into the couch cushion beneath him. Hermione laid there a little lazily, feeling pampered as he took his time lapping up her juices. The orgasm was good, but not like the ones she was used to getting regularly, but that was something she wouldn't dare share with her husband. As if his ego needed another pump... It seemed Nott needed some fine tuning if he was going to please her. For now, she would say nothing. There would be time to teach him later. She looked forward to it.

Did you enjoy that? Draco's voice emerged again. *You always scream when I get you to come with my tongue.*

Look through his eye and see for yourself, she shot back.

Well, don't get too carried away, he said, sounding grumpy. *When you come to bed tonight, I don't want to smell him on you.*

She closed the connection.

Hermione finally sat up, her breathing slowly going back to normal. Nott waited patiently at her feet for her next order, his cock reddened and erect and weeping for relief. His mouth and chin glistened wetly.

She took his chin, tipped his face up.

"You did well," she told him. "But you can be better."

"I aim to please, my Lady," he said. "Show me how I may improve."

“Another time.” She was coming forward on her hands and knees until she could push him down against the armrest on his side of the couch—she straddled him, brushing against his cock. He sucked in a breath, his abdomen contracting, showing his muscles.

“Please,” he whispered.

“Please, what?” she murmured in his ear.

“Honor me, my Lady. I have no right to ask, but—”

“Beg,” she told him.

“Gods,” he said breathlessly. “Please, my Lady. Use me as you please. I’m at your disposal.”

She took his hands, pinned them down on either side of his head so that she was now crouched above him, his cock pressing against her slit. Hermione ground against him a little so that her lips rubbed along him—he exhaled loudly through his teeth.

“Thank you, my Lady,” he said.

She felt a rush of confidence.

“Don’t thank me yet,” she said. “We’re only just starting.”

“May I speak with you, my Lord?”

Lord Malfoy looked up from where he sat at his desk.

“Of course, Pansy,” he said. “Enter.”

Pansy walked into the room and at his invitation, sat at the chair before his desk. She adopted a small, polite smile.

His office was dim, lit within by the weakening light outside. The lamps inside were already turning on by themselves, quickly chasing away the dark. It was now dusk, and his robes were undone around the collar, his hair a little rumpled.

There were tall and narrow arched gothic-style windows behind his desk. She could see the moon, ethereal and white, off in the distance behind some clouds. The fireplace roared away in the hearth. It was a large office and well furnished—a glass-doored cabinet on one wall was filled with various trinkets, odd bits and ends that she’d never thought were worthy of display—a hair ribbon, various mismatched buttons, a couple old and mangled quills, amongst other things. They seemed so trivial and meaningless that she had never thought to ask his reasons for their prominent situation. She’d never known him to hoard things, and he certainly wasn’t the type to keep a study messy, either. Where another powerful wizard might choose instead to place accolades or items of sentimental value, there was this strange collection of ephemera. They’d always given her a funny feeling in her gut so she tried not to mind them that much—but then again, *most* of the manor, including Draco himself, unsettled her, so she didn’t let her thoughts dwell on them too much.

It hadn't occurred to her until months into her employment at the Malfoy home that they *did* hold value to him—just not the sort a regular person might expect.

She had been tending to Hermione earlier that day, arranging her hair after a bath. She'd been drying it with her wand and admiring the thick, dark curls that framed Hermione's face, and then the image of that ribbon in Draco's cabinet flashed back to her and she froze, remembering suddenly with a drop in her stomach that Hermione had once had a habit of wearing a ribbon in her hair during their Hogwarts days. She had never asked Draco for confirmation—wouldn't dare—but knew without a doubt anyway that the ribbon in that eerie glass cabinet was the very same one Hermione had once worn.

Given her prominent role within the manor, there was very, very little that Pansy didn't have access to. She had free roam of the place and its grounds, and among those places was Draco's study. He trusted her to tidy up in there although there usually was no need, to go in and fetch him a letter or that day's copy of the *Prophet*, things like that. Pansy had every opportunity to linger around in that room, perhaps rifle through the drawers of his desk and take a peep at his correspondence, but never dared, always fearful that there was a trap set somewhere there to test her, gauge her trustworthiness. The most she could do was move a little slower than usual, to let her eyes linger, but she didn't dare reach forward and grasp any of the now-obvious evidence of past murders and crimes that he kept inside that cabinet.

The hair ribbon was like a beacon every time she glanced at the cabinet. Once she'd understood its importance and origin, she couldn't look at it without feeling dread coil in her gut. It'd taken some time to work up the courage to eventually stray closer and closer to the cabinet doors and peer in at the other items scattered in that heap, to differentiate them from one another, because there were so many. From afar they made up a tangle of strange shapes and colors, but the closer she got, all she could think of was how there was a dead body somehow attached to its corresponding item.

There were many crammed inside that curio cabinet. So many, in fact, that now and then she'd take notice of one she hadn't seen before on her many visits to Draco's office. A weathered shoe lace. A compass and a scrap of a map. A pair of women's spectacles and a suede glove. A paintbrush. Scraps of bloodied fabric... a handful of human teeth. Way off to the side, there was a stack of old issues of the *Prophet*.

One day, she'd actually worked up the nerve to stand before it, taking a long, full look before leaving the room stunned, wondering how she had never noticed the severed human ear that lay on the bottom shelf, proudly displayed within a red, silk-cushioned box.

Killers kept mementos, she'd heard once. She wondered just how many there were in total... if he had always done this. The ribbon was Hermione, the paintbrush *had* to be Martin's. There was nothing inside there that indicated to George, but Pansy knew there didn't have to be—the Dark Lord had already taken his eye. Was there something in there he had taken from her, and she never noticed?

The question of who the ear belonged to had haunted her for years. She'd been too afraid to ask either the Lord or Lady, not wanting to misstep or bring up any terrible memories. That mystery had been solved only a day ago, when she had taken Longbottom to his new quarters and used magic to tidy him up, among which included giving his unkempt hair a trim. Her fingers had brushed against the hole where an ear should have been and when she pulled the

hair back she went cold with realization before she could control herself. She had resumed the hair cutting silently, trying to process her shock, and he had offered no explanation either. He had hardly said a word that entire time, actually. All he did was stare, clearly trying to gauge whether she was a villain in this story or not, eying her with obvious mistrust.

She didn't blame him.

He had changed so much from his Hogwarts days. She remembered him as a clumsy, forgetful but well-meaning bloke. A bit of an oaf, really. She had rolled her eyes at his countless blunders, had made him the brunt of her jokes far too many times.

Did that still matter to him? She supposed an apology wouldn't make much difference. He would probably ignore it. More pressing was the fact that he was indentured to the Malfoys as much as she was.

It was good to have a new face in the manor. Martin was too quiet most of the time, and he shook every time she came into the room he occupied, as if he thought she was there to spy on him for Draco. They'd had some pleasant conversations and she did approve of him, despite that.

Still, she thought, thinking back to Neville, *it'll take an age for him to open up*.

Well... perhaps not. He would see for himself what was happening here and would make his own judgements soon enough.

I'm not a bad person, she'd wanted to tell him, almost offended by the look in his eye. *I just put myself in a bad situation*.

He of all people had to know that in between black and white of villains and heroes there was a whole spectrum of greys.

But it was much too late for semantics.

"What's on your mind?" Lord Malfoy asked.

"You mentioned you wanted to give me a break, my Lord," she said, looking a little puzzled. "Is that true?"

"You've earned my trust," he said simply. "You've worked hard and kept to your Vows. I'm grateful for the day you joined me. And it's terribly overdue, don't you think?"

It was *really* overdue. She'd never been offered nor asked for a vacation, or even a day off. He might have obliged, given her faithful service, but he'd never hinted at or mentioned the possibility (and truth be told, she'd always been too afraid to ask).

"What would the terms be, my Lord?" she asked, her insides coiling with apprehension.

"You have four months," he said. 'Go do as you please. Visit family. Continue your studies. Travel. Of course, you will be expected to uphold your Vows even if you are not here. I will know if you break them, and there will be punishment.' He fixed her with a level stare. "You've never disobeyed or disappointed me, and I would hate to have my faith in you disrupted. You know the penalty."

She nodded.

"I will behave, my Lord," she promised, and then paused. "It would be good to have some time off, I suppose..."

But what about Hermione and Lucio?

She did not trust Draco. What if he was planning something and simply wanted her out of the way? She remembered that dark, confident demeanor around him while Hermione had been in that strange, spelled sleep—she'd known he had wanted to make Horcruxes for the both of them but had not thought he would do it until Hermione was awake again... a naïve thought. And when he'd told her he'd done it, she knew there was nothing she could've done to stop it, but still couldn't help the guilt she felt over it, as if she'd somehow betrayed Hermione.

She tried to keep the suspicion from her face. His expression betrayed nothing sinister, but he was good at keeping his face neutral to keep his true intentions hidden. Always had been.

"And when would this break take place?" she asked carefully.

Lord Malfoy mulled it over for a moment.

"Whenever you wish," he finally concluded. "I'd prefer Longbottom be fully trained before you go, but considering how long you've gone without this break I won't keep or hold it against you if you want to leave now. He can always learn on the fly if it comes to that."

"I would need to make plans first, before I go," Pansy said. "I can't just leave now."

He nodded.

"Very well. Keep me informed on when you make your decision."

Nott was long gone, and Hermione was back to roaming along the top floor of the manor. She had passed by George's room and listened there briefly, wondering what he did in his spare time, but ultimately heard nor sensed any sign of life within.

He must be out somewhere, or dead asleep, she'd concluded. Good. Then he would not get in her way.

The third floor was full of spare rooms, all furnished but empty. Pansy's quarters were on the East wing, and now Neville's were, too. This left George entirely undisturbed in the West Wing. Hermione wondered if he had requested that, or if Draco simply didn't want him near to everyone else.

She walked along barefoot, her feet sinking into lush carpet when the marble flooring wasn't present. Counting room after unused room. It was so silly to have such a big place for such a small family. A small house or a cottage might do just fine—but Draco would never go for it.

He would rather live in this great, empty home and insist we're all the better for it.

And why? It wasn't as if they had possessions enough to fill the place. They had the mandatory furniture to complete every room but if she went into each of the empty rooms around her there would be no personal effects to be found anywhere, no boxes storing books

or photos or clothes. Draco had told her long ago she could decorate the place any way she liked, that she had unlimited funds at her disposal to do so, but Hermione held no interest in playing homemaker. Not for him.

Lucio's nursery was probably the only time I ever took him up on that offer, she thought. Indeed, that large room was more lively within than the rest of the manor. Hermione had done that deliberately, choosing a great assortment of toys and books and decorations all to try and help banish the oppressive atmosphere from hanging around her son.

As she walked around, Hermione focused on her power, exercising her shifting abilities. Her talons on either hand were a given—they came and went as easily as she breathed, and she could control their speed of growth and sharpness. She turned a corner, let the magic roll over her left arm, morphing it into a huge black wing. Turned it back into her human arm and then transformed the other. Rolled her shoulders, feeling her muscles shift. Her hearing had grown keen with these exercises and she could hear Draco in his study, speaking with Pansy—she focused on that, drawing their voices out from below like a spider's thread.

He was giving Pansy a four-month break.

Pansy's tone was guarded and neutral as always, but once or twice her control slipped to betray her surprise. To an outside observer she might have sounded normal, but Hermione was so used to her that she could sense the minute changes in her inflection.

Hermione found herself dreading the thought of being without Pansy for such a length of time. Pansy, besides Lucio, had been her closest confidant for years. Lucio was her son and she loved him with all her heart, but there was so much she couldn't talk to him about. He was only a child, and didn't deserve the weight of her very adult problems.

I sound so selfish.

Pansy *deserved* that break. She'd worked so hard and never complained. She, too, must suffer from the things she saw here. Beyond this manor she had a family who loved her and had not seen her for many years, only hearing from her from the letters she infrequently wrote, never divulging the true nature of her employment.

Hermione couldn't cling to her like a weed. She could not choke her with her own selfish grief. Like Lucio, Pansy deserved to live her life without someone else's troubles plaguing her.

She too had the same suspicion that Pansy had—was Draco planning something? It was highly peculiar, how generous he was acting these days.

She heard when Pansy took her leave and then listened more intently, wondering if Draco ever spoke to himself. But there was nothing. Just the shuffling of some papers, then the sound of his chair rolling back and then his heavy, ominous steps pacing around his study.

It would be time for dinner soon. She could hear Pansy reminding Lucio to go wash up, now that she'd reached the nursery.

She was about to shift her attention away and go join them when she heard Draco leave his study, an intent pace to his step. Hermione focused back on him, frowning. Was he looking for her?

He was going too far—he was becoming more and more faint—but not faint enough for her to hear him enter a room.

Which one? She couldn't discern. Perhaps just the bedroom. Sighing, Hermione was about to pull away when she heard Martin's startled voice from two floors below.

He's still here?

Had Draco found out about him so soon? Was he going to hurt him? Her stomach sank.

Hermione tore out of the room and rushed down toward the library.

As Hermione was wandering the third floor and listening in on Draco and Pansy's conversation, Martin continued to paint.

The day had been a long and curious one, and to distract himself from it, he had stayed past his usual time and kept going, strangely compelled to do more and more.

His arm was tired and the fumes of the paint had by now made him a little light-headed despite the open window to his right. For as cold as it was outside he hardly felt it, thanks to the fire that had sprung up in the hearth upon dusk's arrival. It could get a tad stifling at times, but the heat helped the paint dry faster, as it normally took much longer to do so. He'd paused now and then to eat or drink from the food he brought with him daily, but those breaks were always short and largely silent. He wasn't the most extroverted of people but in a case like this he found himself *longing* for company sometimes. The funny thing was, most of the available company that lived here frightened him—all except for two: the Lady of the manor and her son.

Martin dared to pause for a moment, looking around. It didn't surprise him how dark it had gotten outside—he'd been too aware of how much later he'd stayed than normal. The library was a beautiful place, and he'd been in awe of it his first few weeks here, but by now it had more than lost its appeal and he found himself bored of being stuck in the same room for so long—a complaint he would never dare utter aloud. Luckily, painting helped him forget where he was, as long as he focused on the canvas.

It was a struggle not to ponder over what had happened between himself and Lady Malfoy mere hours ago—in fact, it refused to leave his mind altogether. His lips still tingled with the memory of the kiss, and he kept wondering if she would come to see him again.

He doubted any of them knew he was still here—suppose he stayed until the morning and pretended he had, in fact, gone home?

Lord Malfoy was a keen observer—he would spy his rumpled, paint-spattered clothing and know the truth. Would he be annoyed? Perhaps he could be flattered. Martin was so committed to this commission that he'd foregone sleep in order to work on it. A thing like that! He could already picture Lord Malfoy's knowing stare.

Martin dared not laugh aloud. He put down his palette and brush, allowed himself to stretch his aching upper body.

The portrait of Lord Malfoy was at last complete. He could have called it finished a couple hours ago but as was his habit, he had busied himself in the smallest of details, from the individual lashes on the Lord's piercing eyes to the detailing on the walls around the library. In another half-hour, he might be truly satisfied.

He did not normally finish a portrait in such a short time frame. He liked to take his time to truly capture the essence of what was before his easel. But with a subject as unnerving as Lord Malfoy, Martin had sped through it as if he were on a Firebolt.

Most models never stared at you unless you specifically asked them to in the beginning stages of a portrait, or when the facial rendering was occurring. It had been that way with Lady Hermione—he had sympathized with the obvious discomfort in her expression, and when he had finally captured her likeness and told her so, her eyes slid away in relief, and she had largely avoided staring at him unless they had been speaking.

Lord Malfoy, however, had no such qualms. He had stared and stared at Martin as he had worked, even after Martin had informed him that his likeness had been captured, and it had worn at Martin's nerves and made his hands tremble although he fought not to show it. Lord Malfoy's stares were not unfriendly—he merely gazed at him as if he were analyzing him down to each molecule. It did nothing to assuage Martin's nerves, as those clear, rarely-blinking eyes weighed on one's conscience. The strangest phenomena—a stare that was tangible. It made Martin feel as though he were a specimen pinned to a cork board, ready for dissection, and it was that same, calculated, all-seeing stare that was now painted onto the surface of his canvas.

Actually, he might just wipe his hands of this one now. The more time he spent with it, the more paranoid he grew that it actually *was* watching him, despite the fact that it had not been animated yet.

Lady Hermione's words floated back to him.

'Paint as fast as you can and get out while there's still a chance.'

It made him shudder to recollect the grave look in her eyes.

Something was coming, wasn't it? Was Lord Malfoy planning something else now that he had this Longbottom fellow in his grasp?

For Hermione herself to have warned him spoke volumes.

He was in danger—had always been, really, from the moment he had first met Lord Malfoy.

Not like I had a choice, he thought bitterly. *Did anybody here have a choice?*

Now, entangled as he was with Lady Malfoy, surely that risk had doubled. He probably should regret his choice but couldn't find it in himself to. A woman of that caliber did not come along often. He was in awe of her in every possible way. That she had decided to focus her attentions on him was something he never would have expected, and he found himself utterly at her feet.

By some miracle, Lord Malfoy seemed not to know of their interest in each other. Martin feared that day, that confrontation. He would likely face severe punishment or death. Lady

Hermione had told him an open marriage agreement had sort of taken place between the two, that by some strange stroke of luck, Lord Malfoy had allowed her to take playthings if she so chose. Martin understood he was not the only one and tried not to think about it too much. She owed him no explanation or reasoning, after all, and he had no right to question her. However brief this lasted between them, he would treasure every second, and if she chose to walk away at some point, well... he hoped it would not be on bad terms.

He stared uneasily at the painting, taking in his own work.

Paired with Lady Hermione's portrait, these were probably his finest works yet—but he felt no pride in them. The steeled fury and vulnerability of Hermione's portrait that he had been commanded to capture would haunt him for a long time, he knew. That, and the boastful, wicked expression of Malfoy.

He felt rather as though he had been plucked from an ordinary life and dropped into a fairytale—a wicked, uncomfortable one—and its thorned vines had snared him, would not let him go.

There was a slight breeze behind him suddenly—Martin turned, looking straight to the door, expecting to find somebody there. Nothing. He frowned, turned, and jumped violently upon finding Lord Malfoy beside him where a mere second ago there had been nothing.

His exclamation of shock got caught in his throat and died quickly without being uttered—a small mercy. Martin raised his hand to his galloping heart, staring at Malfoy, who watched him with the slightest hint of a smirk upon his lips; his eyes flat in contrast.

"My Lord," Martin managed to utter. "I did not expect you."

"You usually don't stay here this long," Lord Malfoy said. 'I saw there was somebody here and came to investigate.' He let out a slight chuckle. "You aren't my hostage, you know. You're free to leave for the day."

Martin didn't believe him, but he bowed his head in acknowledgement.

"I've just finished your portrait, my Lord."

"Oh?"

"I stayed a while longer to complete it," Martin said with a gesture to the canvas beside them. "Does it meet your approval, my Lord? Is there anything you would have improved?"

How meek he sounded. He hated it. But under the weight of the Lord's eyes there was no room for any other feeling—he demanded fear and obedience.

Lord Malfoy took a few steps closer to the huge canvas, studying it with his imperial eye, saying nothing for some moments.

"I see no faults," he finally said, and Martin felt himself relax by a tiny fraction. "As usual. It's a fine piece, though I think my wife's portrait will outshine everything I've commissioned from you."

Martin silently agreed.

Lord Malfoy turned to him, his gaze suddenly engaged and curious to an unnerving degree. Martin fought the urge to take a step backward.

“I’ve seen the process of animating a painting before, when I was a boy,” he began.

Martin struggled to picture him as any age other than he was now—how might he have looked a decade ago? As an infant, even? Had he always had an aura of oppression around him? Had there ever been a time when he smiled in earnest?

“I saw how it was conducted, when my mother and father had their own portraits were made, and then my own,” the Lord continued. “I knew it was just an enchantment that made our images move and adopt our personalities. But I wonder now: is it possible to capture an actual physical being inside a painting? Like a cage?”

A wave of ice rolled over Martin, freezing him to where he stood.

The Dark Lord stared at him, expecting an answer.

“I’ve never heard of it being possible, my Lord,” Martin finally managed to say. “I don’t know if it has even ever been attempted. I was certainly never taught this, even in theory.”

That did not seem to dampen the near manic gleam in the Dark Lord’s eye.

“Hm.” He clasped his hands behind his back. Martin knew it was not the answer he had wanted, and sensed that this was a challenge the Dark Lord would now take upon himself.

I have to warn her.

“Tomorrow, you’ll begin the portrait of my son,” Lord Malfoy said. “Come an hour after your regular time—I won’t have this interfering with his lessons.”

Martin only just remembered to bow. “Of course, my Lord.”

The Dark Lord said nothing else, so Martin set to cleaning up his station, waving his wand to gather his brushes and clean them, to put away his palette. The canvas stayed on the easel to dry—he would relocate it in the morning, and when it was completely dry he would varnish it.

When he had finished he began to head toward the main entrance. Lord Malfoy had not said a word, only watched him clean, but as Martin started to exit, he followed him, escorting him to the foyer until they reached the small circle of space where the anti-apparition wards were lifted just enough to allow entry to the most trusted of guests—Martin, being one of them.

The house was largely quiet. Martin wondered where Lady Hermione was and when he might be able to speak to her again.

Martin knew the spot well by now—a designated position by the front entrance that the Dark Lord activated whenever he left. If all his other guests needed such an escort, Martin didn’t know. He supposed the Dark Lord kept this place in tight control, and severely limited access as to who could come and go freely.

The Dark Lord graciously gestured for him to move forward and Martin did, stepped within the invisible circle and immediately felt the restrictive weight of the countless

enchancements in the house lift from him. It was like taking a breath of pure fresh air after being stuck in a crypt. His chest expanded gratefully with the loss of constriction—he felt his mood lift. He thought of home with relief, couldn't wait to lie down and wipe this place from his mind for a few hours.

"You will not tell my wife about our conversation," Lord Malfoy said suddenly, the command in his tone impossible to misinterpret. "That is not for her ears. It stays between us."

Martin's heart sank.

"Yes, my Lord."

"Good," the Dark Lord replied. "My trust in you grows yet. I'd like to keep you on, even after you've finished my commission. I'll likely want more in the future."

"That's a high honor indeed, my Lord," Martin said, going pale, his stomach twisting with panic and hate.

"Every court needs its painter, after all," Lord Malfoy said thoughtfully. "Once mine are on display I'm sure you'll have a steady flow of commissions. It won't take long before you'll never have to worry about saving for retirement. And you'll have me to thank."

His meaning was not lost on Martin.

You can fall in line and prosper, or go home and fade into obscurity.

Was he even giving him a choice? Or was he musing aloud for his own benefit? Martin's head swam.

"Indeed," was all he could say in return.

An awkward beat passed between them. Lord Malfoy seemed perfectly at ease.

"Good night, then," Lord Malfoy said, his hands still behind his back. He looked like a commanding officer standing there in his pitch-black robes, ready to give the order to execute a prisoner.

"Until tomorrow, my Lord," Martin said, bowing, and without another moment's hesitation he Apparated away.

Back in the library, the small, midnight black cat that had watched Martin and Draco's conversation from the top of the nearest bookcase, blended into a shadow, had retreated. She had transformed back into the Lady of the house and was in the tub submerged in water, steam curling in the air around her as she mulled her husband's words over and over. Her arms were slung over the sides of the white tub and she stewed with anger at the realization of what he had implied with his questions, the knowing of what horror might find her next, if he succeeded. Her talons were back, long and lethal, scraping the enamel off the tub in long threads as she flexed her hands closed then open, considering her next course of action.

A/N:

So I took a break from posting bc updating/editing so much in December wiped me out. Martin and Hermione becoming lovers was something I couldn't decide whether to go forward with or not for a long time. Ultimately, Hermione needs more wins so I had to change course a bit and had to go back and fix a lot of stuff because I'd already written the bulk of these last chapters with this never happening. I hope it doesn't seem too out-of-character for her to suddenly take on two lovers. I figured she would want to experiment as much as she can because Draco severely limited that part of her life when he came into the picture, and because she's settling into her powers more, which gives her the confidence and the desire to do it. Plus, it makes Draco jealous/annoyed, which is a plus. She's going to play him like a fiddle. Her chains are disappearing-I think it would be only natural for her to run headfirst to her new freedoms.

26. If only you knew

The following day, after his lessons, Pansy led Lucio to the library, where Martin was waiting.

He noticed them enter as he prepared his workstation and bowed.

“Good afternoon,” Pansy called.

“Good afternoon,” Martin said. His smile was tentative.

She led Lucio right up to him. The boy seemed excited—he looked up at Martin without a bit of shyness.

“Hullo,” he said. “Pansy says you’re going to paint me. I’ve never been painted before.”

Martin’s smile relaxed a little.

“I’m honored to introduce you to the process,” he said, and then motioned to the chairs behind the easel. “Please—take a seat and make yourself comfortable.”

The boy was led to a comfortable chair a few feet away from the easel. Instead of a large canvas, this time there was a large pad of smooth paper, and a small tin full of sticks of charcoal, waiting to be used.

Pansy stood a little off to the side. Lucio saw her and gestured excitedly for her to sit, too. She smiled despite herself and sat down, relieved.

Martin noticed this and said nothing, but it touched him to see how considerate the boy was.

“Will it take a terribly long time?” Lucio asked. He’d settled in his seat naturally, quite at ease. He was a little tall for his age, but his feet didn’t yet reach the floor in an adult-sized chair. He swung his legs back and forth.

Goodness. The boy was bursting with energy. Martin wondered if he would have trouble keeping him still.

“Yes, I’m afraid it will,” Martin replied, peering out from behind his drawing board at Lucio, his eyes assessing but warm as he studied the young boy’s face.

“I’m afraid it can get a little dull,” he continued. “Being a model isn’t very fun, but I work quickly so you don’t have to sit there forever.”

“Do I need to look at you?” Lucio asked. “Mummy says I do.”

His little hands tapped out an unfamiliar rhythm on the armrests of his chair.

“Yes, but not for very long,” Martin said, smiling, touched that Hermione had prepped her son before the meeting. “Just enough so that I know how to draw your eyes.”

“Father says I mustn’t fidget,” Lucio remarked, his legs swinging to a sudden stop. “He says I fidget too much. I can’t help it—I don’t do it to annoy him.”

“Well, you may fidget as much as you like,” Martin said. “And it’s alright to talk, too. I only ask that you try not to move your head too much—can you do that?”

“Sure!”

Martin assessed the large sheet of paper before him, sectioning it off with invisible lines so that he might fit lots of sketches on one page. He didn’t need to look at the tin to retrieve a bit of charcoal—his movements were natural and based on memory. He cast a long, studious look at Lucio, and within moments, the soft scratchy sound of charcoal being dragged on primed canvas filled the library.

Lucio watched Martin work for a moment. It was a funny thing, to be actively stared at like this. He wanted not to sit before Martin but behind him—he was terribly curious to see the drawings take form. This man had quite a lot of talent, to be able to paint Mummy and Father so well. He wondered how his own portrait would turn out—it was so exciting to think about.

There was a sort of *crick* sound and then something thudded onto the carpet. Martin sighed and muttered something under his breath, picked up the broken bit of charcoal off the floor and repaired it. He resumed drawing without a word.

“Why don’t you use a camera?” Lucio asked, genuinely curious.

“I could,” Martin said, peering at him from his easel, looking amused, as if he’d never been asked that before. “I do. But painted portraits are very traditional. They have existed as a custom before photographs and a lot of people like that it’s a more involved process. It’s more intimate. A camera is just a machine. You can make very beautiful photographs if you wish but I’ve always preferred doing this sort of thing by hand.”

Lucio pondered this for a moment. Martin carried on with his sketch.

“Historically,” he continued, “only great and wealthy families could afford to have large portraits like this made. Think of kings and queens you’ve read about—they of course, had their own made to show their power and wealth. Common folk had portraits done, too, of course, but if you compare them you’ll notice they were usually smaller and less detailed. Have you been to an art museum?”

Lucio frowned, thinking.

“He has,” Pansy said, nodding.

“Mummy took me to one,” he said, remembering suddenly. “There were hundreds of paintings.”

Martin nodded. “Didn’t they look wonderful, hanging on the walls?”

“Not all of them were pretty,” Lucio said. Some of the faces he’d seen within those gilded frames had been downright ugly.

“Art doesn’t exist solely to be beautiful,” Martin replied patiently. “It is a poor man indeed who looks at art seeking only beauty, and not meaning. I should say there’s nothing wrong

with making art that has no meaning. It definitely isn't a requirement to always have it represent something. But in my opinion, my favorite kind of art is the kind that few days after having seen it, I can't get out of my mind. Have you ever had something like that happen?"

"There was a painting of a lot of dead birds on a table," Lucio said. "They'd been shot down. I asked mummy why someone would want a painting of that."

"And what did she say?"

"There was a sign under it," Lucio recalled. "Mummy said the painting was made for a hunter."

Martin nodded, smudging a bit of charcoal on the paper with his thumb. "Yes. Hunting genre paintings were rather popular back in the day. It makes sense that a hunter would want a souvenir of his accomplishment."

"But why when they're dead?" Lucio asked. "Why not show them when they're alive?"

"Well, if the hunter hadn't killed those poor birds, what would his accomplishment be?"

"Letting them live," Lucio said adamantly. Pansy hid her grin behind her hand. Martin nodded, laughing. For a split second, Lucio believed Martin's laugh was mocking, and was about to turn indignant, but then realized Martin was only laughing in reaction to his response in a good-natured way.

He settled down quickly.

"You're right," Martin said. "He might have let those poor animals carry on with their lives and had a nice painting of a forest instead over his mantle. But I hope you see what I'm getting at: art can serve as a record of things: just by looking at the painting of those dead birds (were they pheasants, by any chance? Or ducks?) and seeing the plaque underneath, we learn a few things. This was a real man who lived, and he shot and killed those birds, and brought them to his house, and hired an artist to paint them. The signature tells us who painted it, and in what year. He took enough pride in his work that he wanted a record of it to decorate his home."

Lucio hadn't considered this.

"It's still ugly," he admitted. "I wouldn't want a painting of *that* here."

The portrait of Lady Hermione quickly flashed in Martin's mind. Was that any different? She lived, that was clear enough—but didn't her very presence here and her portrait serve as a trophy and a record that she had also been someone's accomplishment?

And made by his own hand, no less...

Martin cleared his throat.

"You should know art has always been utilized throughout history to capture ugly things, too. Horrible things. Whether it's pretty or not, it does serve a purpose."

"Like what?" Lucio asked, tilting his head, and Martin had to stop his current sketch and begin anew. He didn't mind at all—a child's likeness was best rendered when allowed to be

themselves and not overdirected. The boy's expression of curiosity was one he really wanted to capture. Plus, he was greatly enjoying this conversation.

"War," Martin said simply. "Death. Plague. Poverty. That's just naming a few. Sometimes, more can be communicated through a single image of a desolate battlefield than a thousand-word paper on it. It serves as much as a record as a textbook can."

It struck him then that the tone of this conversation was much too morose for a child. Would the Lord and Lady approve?

Pansy had not cut him off once with a warning. She seemed just as interested in the topic as Lucio. He supposed that was a good indicator, but he chose to move on all the same.

"Could you turn the other way, please?" he asked. "Yes, towards that wall. Wonderful."

"I want to learn to draw," Lucio declared. "Like you."

This took Martin aback in a pleasant way.

"Remember what your father said, my dear," Pansy said to him in a hushed tone.

"It isn't fair," Lucio returned unhappily, breaking his pose to look beseechingly at Pansy. "Why won't he let me? I've been good!"

"I would be happy to teach you, if your father changes his mind," Martin said. "But in the meantime, let's get these sketches finished."

Since Pansy had caught him and Hermione together, Martin had been nervous around Pansy, fearing that she secretly judged him or even hated him for acting so brazenly in Lord Malfoy's home. Hermione had told him that she was an ally and could be trusted, but it had done little to assuage his paranoia—until now. She was polite and friendly, and through all their interactions that day he never sensed any hostility, and it put him at ease.

Lucio asked question after question, and often sought Pansy's opinion, too. Martin liked him more and more. He was energetic and curious and very friendly—there was no doubt he would fare better away at school than Martin had.

The boy was in such a rush to grow up and go to school—Martin couldn't help but wonder what life was like when he was not around. Was it so unbearable? He must be very lonely.

After an hour of sketching and dabbling with charcoal, Martin finally allowed Lucio to take a break. Pansy had taken him to the bathroom, and had some refreshments prepared for them all, which they ate in the dining hall—a nice change of pace. There, Pansy had opened up more, and they'd shared stories from their times at school. Even Lucio had been rapt with attention, though Martin noted that she expertly avoided speaking of her experiences with either Draco or Hermione.

When they'd finished and resumed their work in the library, Lucio, full of food, began to drowse a little. Martin had nearly finished his studies by then, so he went back to the earlier ones and worked on developing them further.

The boy had the eyes of his father, but where Lord Malfoy's eyes were cold and devoid of humanity, his son's brimmed with it. In having already rendered the Lord and Lady so far, Martin could easily analyze every element of his cherubic little face. The eyes were obvious. But the way the boy tilted his head to look at things, his smile, held the essence of his mother. Even his hair, though the same pale blond of his fathers', had the lively curls of his mother. Lord Malfoy's hair was always neat and short, moving but rarely. The Little Lord's hair was past his ears, frequently falling across his face, prompting him to push it away as he was doing now.

Lucio had woken and turned to look at something that had flown past the nearest window, stretching in his seat. Pansy took him by the shoulder.

"Not much longer now," she said brightly, trying to cheer him up.

Martin supposed that once ready to begin composing the painting, he would guide the boy to sit or stand by the windows. The background of the austere bookcases and mahogany wood felt too oppressive for him. It would do better to have greenery and an open sky surrounding him.

Perhaps Lord Malfoy wanted all three to match, but I think this works best... I'm sure he'll tell me if he doesn't like it, Martin thought.

But Lord Malfoy said he trusted his ability. And this was him using it.

"When did you start using magic?"

The hand that had been dragging a stick of charcoal along the paper paused mid-stroke. Martin pondered.

"I believe I was about seven years old."

He couldn't see the boy from behind his pad of paper but could imagine him tilting his head, thinking.

"When did you get a wand?"

"That same year."

"Where?"

Martin wiped his hands on a rumpled rag from his toolbox.

"There is a small shop in Diagon Alley," he said. "It's called Ollivander's. He is a wandmaker and the place is filled to bursting with wands of all sorts. No two wands are alike, and you could spend a month looking through each box in there and come out not having seen a third of it yet."

"What about you, Pansy?" Lucio asked, twisting in his seat to look at her.

"The exact same for me," she said, grinning. "I learned I had magic when I was seven, and then my parents took me to get my wand at Ollivander's, too." She smiled. "It was a wonderful day."

Lucio looked wistfully down at his hands, as if compelling them to exhibit *some* sign of ability. Nothing happened.

“Will I go there to get my wand, too?” he asked.

“That depends on your parents but it’s most likely, yes. When you go there you’ll get to try out wands until you find the right one for you. It’s very exciting.”

The boy seemed to radiate impatience.

“But can’t I go to school without one?”

“I’m afraid not,” Pansy replied. “In the beginning you must have one to learn the basics of magic. It’s not until you’re older that you can attempt wandless magic, since it takes a lot of skill.”

Sympathy struck at Martin’s heart, just looking at Lucio. He seemed crestfallen now, his eyes lowering and fixing on the floor.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “Time will fly by. You’ll blink, and it’ll have passed, and then it’ll be time for you to go to school and learn new things. But be careful not to build it up too highly in your head before you get there. Sometimes things aren’t always as exciting as we expect them to be.”

“Did you not like school?” Lucio asked him, cocking his head.

He was very perceptive, Martin thought. He had that same inward, analytical look that Hermione often wore.

“I did,” Martin replied carefully. ‘But I wasn’t very popular—I was alone a lot, and there were a few students there who tried to make things harder for me.’ He wiped a streak of charcoal from his palm, watched it fade. “There were quite a few people I didn’t care for in my time at school.”

“They were mean to you,” Lucio said.

Martin resumed put the rag down and stepped back from the easel, hands on his hips, assessing the bunch of sketches before him with a critical eye.

“That was a long time ago now,” he said. “It doesn’t matter anymore. You should know that no two experiences are the same. I’m sure you’ll have quite the opposite experience.”

By the time Lord and Lady Malfoy entered the room at the end of that day’s session, Martin had finished several detailed charcoal portraits of Lucio and laid them out on a table, presented them to the two of them. Lucio ran to his mother and wrapped his arms around her. She picked him up and kissed him on the cheek. The Malfoys pored over the drawings together, with Pansy standing beside Hermione. Martin caught a glimpse of the Lady and Pansy holding hands—a strange sense of relief touched his heart.

Martin watched from his station, his hands behind his back, gripping each other.

Lord Malfoy examined the works with an appraising eye, found nothing at fault. He smiled a little and nodded his approval. Martin couldn’t tell or not if he had actually *winked* at him, or if his vision had glitched out for a moment. Lady Hermione took her time regarding each

of them, taking in every detail and masterful stroke that made up the faithful images of her son.

Where the Lady had been tense and almost avoidant of the portrait-maker's (and now the audience's) eye, and Lord Malfoy had been challenging and hostile, their son was open and earnest before the viewer—not smiling outright but there was such a sense of friendliness and assuredness in his look that it had compelled Martin more than once to smile in response as he'd drawn them up. They were truly charming portraits, and Martin noticed with secret satisfaction that Hermione could not stop staring at them.

Lucio, propped up on her hip, stared at the drawings in outright awe.

"It's like looking in a mirror!" he exclaimed, pointing at them. "That's *me*!"

Lord Malfoy's smile widened and he looked to his son.

"You think he did a good job, then?"

Lucio nodded emphatically.

Now Lord Malfoy looked at his wife, his hand rising to the nape of her neck.

"I agree. What do *you* think, my love?"

Lady Hermione straightened, pulled out of her spell. "They're beautiful. I love them."

Martin bowed, flushing with pleasure.

"I'll start on the painting right away, then, if you are all pleased."

"Well, excellent," Lord Malfoy said. "Lucio has his tutoring in the mornings so for these you'll have to come later from now on. Aim for noon."

There was no '*does that work for you?*' or '*is that alright?*' It was an order and expectation. No room for bartering, not that Martin had planned to. This commission had made it so that Martin needed to seek no other employment for *quite* a while. Simply put, he had no argument against it, and Lord Malfoy knew very well he had nothing else to do outside of the manor presently. Even his father, ill as he was, was now being looked after by a hired-on healer full time. Martin nodded, bowing his head.

"Of course, my Lord."

"Then we'll see you tomorrow," Lord Malfoy said, already walking to the door.

"Come, Lucio," he called, "let's see if Pansy will give us something tasty before dinner."

Lucio smiled and followed his father to the door, took his hand. Martin began to pack up his things, scraping the mix of paints off his palette with a palette knife. A process easily completed with magic, but he'd always loved doing it by hand... and Lady Malfoy was still lingering nearby. He sensed that she wanted to speak with him privately. Wanting to speak to her too, Martin took his time in beginning the cleaning process.

Waiting at the door, Lord Malfoy held out his arm for his wife to take.

"Will you join us, my love?" he asked.

"I wanted to talk to Martin before he leaves, my Lord," Lady Hermione said. "About these drawings."

"Is that so?" Lord Malfoy asked.

Martin couldn't help but look. The Lord and Lady were staring at each other intensely—Lord Malfoy looked stern, but the Lady seemed resolute in her posture. Her chin was pushed up, her posture confident yet tense. Martin fumbled his brushes and looked away quickly. It was the strangest thing—he got the sense a whole conversation was going on without either of them opening their mouths.

Does Lord Malfoy know by now? He wondered, busying himself with putting his used brushes in the jar of turpenoid. Or is he merely beginning to suspect?

It was only a brief moment that it lasted, but to Martin it felt like a whole hour had passed before the Lord's face cracked into a devious grin.

"If it pleases you, then, my Lady," he said. "We'll be waiting for you in the dining room."

His eyes fixed on Martin.

"Don't dally."

He hoisted his son up onto his shoulder and then they were gone, the door closing behind them.

Martin felt the tightness in his chest ease at once.

Visibly relaxed now, Hermione approached him. There was nothing in her expression to indicate distress or displeasure. Martin was certain by now that she and Lord Malfoy had spoken to each other somehow but decided to pretend he had not noticed—even if he desperately wanted to ask to see if he was right. He smiled at her as she approached.

"You want another portrait, is that it?" he asked.

She halted, taken by surprise, and then sputtered into laughter. It filled the library as it echoed—a lovely sound. Martin realized with a shock how it might have been the first time he'd truly heard her laugh since coming to work here. And then, perhaps jealously but certainly foolishly, he wondered how it was in private, if Lord Malfoy made her laugh when there was no one else around.

Finished, she had her hand over her mouth and her eyes had gone a little serious. She seemed a little taken aback by her outburst.

"Is something the matter?" he asked, concerned. His brushes stood abandoned, submerged in the jar. He waved his wand quickly, casting a charm for all of it to tend to itself. Immediately he heard the brushes clinking away inside the glass jar, the palette knife resume scraping the palette clean. The tubes of paint he'd used marched themselves back into his box of paints, arranging themselves neatly within.

"No," she was saying, pulling her hand away from her mouth. "No. It's just—laughing is rare for me here. At least, good-spirited laughter, anyway."

He could believe that easily. He couldn't really pin Lord Malfoy as the sort to constantly crack jokes—at least, ones that didn't come at someone else's expense. Her reaction, that unrestrained laugh—a swell of pride overtook him.

She turned, reached her hand out to the table where he'd left his drawings for them to review. They levitated off the table and arranged themselves into a neat stack, flew into her waiting hands. She hugged them to her chest carefully so as to not warp the thick paper.

It was an unexpectedly endearing move, coming from her—at once Martin could picture her as she must have been at Hogwarts, clad in her school robes, holding her books carefully everywhere she went. He wished they'd gone to the same school. Would they have been friends? Would she have wanted him then? Would Lord Malfoy still have been an obstacle?

"I just wanted to know if I could have these," she said softly. "When you're finished with them, of course. I know you need them as a reference."

Martin couldn't take his eyes off her. She was usually so guarded. Whenever she let her walls down around him, he was struck with the knowledge that she was truly letting him see her. The magnitude of that choice was not lost on him.

"We have photographs of him, of course," she continued, "but Draco always has him look so stiff and formal. You captured him just as he is. I know Draco will probably have him pose for his painting, too, but regardless of how those come out I think I'll love these better. I can see his spirit in them, silly as that sounds."

"It isn't silly at all," he replied earnestly. "Of course, you can have them. I *want* you to have them."

He gestured behind him to a folio, which contained his previous sketches for hers and Lord Malfoy's portraits. They had come out very well, too.

"Will you not want the others, too, my Lady?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"No," she said. Martin couldn't blame her but had thought it only fair to ask.

"My husband might want them," she muttered. "But he can ask you himself if he does."

She was staring at Lord Malfoy's finished portrait, standing off to the side, leaning against another chair.

"How much for them?" she asked suddenly, tearing her eyes away, and if he had liked her before he adored her now.

"Lord Malfoy already pays me most generously for my work and time," he said. "Think of these as a gift."

She nodded, smiling, her cheeks lovely and pink. He wished he could paint her just the way she was now. *This* was the portrait that should have been captured of her, not that uncomfortably voyeuristic and seductive one her husband had demanded.

She set them aside on a nearby side table and then approached him, a heated look in her eyes. Martin melted at the sight. Impulsively, she moved forward, prompting him to mirror

her. They reached each other at the same time, their hands catching in each other's hair. He kissed her deep, his hand already trailing over her body. They ended up against a bookcase, with Hermione's back pressed against it. She leaned into him, hooking her leg around his hip, her skirt falling back to reveal her thigh. She was not wearing anything underneath—a realization that sent a dizzying wave of lust through him.

She licked at his earlobe, ground her hips against his erection over his trousers. Martin sucked in a breath.

"Hermione," he whispered. She did it again, her eyes half-lidded and oh, so tempting...

"Quick," she was whispering. "We have to be careful—" and then, "Touch me, touch me."

She cut off, moaning as Martin buried his face into her breasts, one hand groping her ass firmly, with her encouragement. Hermione pulled his head up and kissed him, nibbled at his bottom lip, their breaths mixing.

She took his hand, guided it to touch her where she was already hot and wet, waiting for him.

Martin went weak-kneed.

This was moving so quickly. They'd only kissed for the first time the day before. Now he was exploring her core, his fingers gently teasing at her clitoris. He usually didn't go so fast. But she wanted him, and that was enough to convince him to follow her command, even if she should suggest he jump off a cliff.

Nothing's normal here, anyway, he told himself, drowning in her scent.

She clutched him tighter, her fingers pressing into his shoulders. Her lips rubbed against his skin.

He teased her for a moment, but she wouldn't have it. Hermione took his hand and guided his fingers inside her, stifling a moan. She clenched around him—Martin exhaled, stepped in closer to her and she let go, allowing him to take charge. Her gaze was half-lidded, heavy with desire. Martin nuzzled at her chest, sank his fingers deeper inside, crooking them to rub at her.

"Yes," she moaned. "Yes. I need you."

He kissed her again, and it was sloppy, but she didn't seem to mind. Her hands pressed at his sides, urging him on. They broke apart, and she took his hand again, guided his strokes inside her.

"I wish we had more time. If Draco comes in—"

Martin began to thrust his fingers inside her in short but deep strokes—Hermione bit her lip to stifle a moan and sagged into his hold. His arm around her back supported her. She reached up, undid the front of her gown so her bare breasts came into view, all full and heavy and ready for his attention. He leaned down, nuzzled his face into them, kissing the tip of one, his lips wrapping around her stiff nipple, teasing it with his tongue. She clenched around his fingers again and gave a whimper.

“It will be worth it,” Martin said, bending low to whisper in her ear. “If he should find out and kills me in retaliation, and I die with this picture of you like this in my mind, I’ll go happily.”

Draco looked up at her entry to the dining room.

She went straight to Lucio and gave him a kiss on the top of his head, and then went to Draco at the head of the table, having anticipated his command to come to him.

Pleased, he took her hand and kissed it, gave a discreet sniff about the air—and found nothing.

“Forgive us for starting without you, my love,” he said as he rose to pull out her chair. “The sound of Lucio’s stomach grumbling was about to start echoing around the room.”

“Don’t starve yourselves on my account,” Hermione said, sitting down. Draco’s hand trailed over her arm as he passed her on his way back to his seat.

“Has Martin left, then?” Draco asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said as she started tucking in to her food.

“What did you stay behind to talk about?” he asked, tilting his head slightly. His eyes were a little cool, a little suspicious.

“The drawings of Lucio,” Hermione said, holding the eye contact without flinching. “I liked them so much I wanted to ask if I could keep them.”

“A Lady does not ask,” Draco replied sternly with a raised brow, “she demands.”

Hermione gave him a look.

“Have I taught you nothing?” His tone, at least, had turned tender.

“You don’t have to remind me,” she said stiffly. “I know, Draco.”

“Then why did I go to all that trouble if you’re just going to ignore it?”

Lucio was watching them curiously, having stopped eating.

“Everything’s alright, darling,” Hermione reassured him. “Your father’s just being fastidious.”

“What does that mean?” Lucio asked.

Draco smiled.

“What your mother means is that I’m much too overbearing about little things,” he said, and then looked at Hermione. “Is that about right, my love?”

She smiled. “Perfectly.”

Remember what you are, Hermione, he sent to her. You must never let someone else think they’re on equal terms with you.

Hermione took a bite of roast potatoes, not looking at him.

Forgive me, my Lord, she replied. She felt his cold hand land on her thigh underneath the table and squeeze. *I didn't mean to upset you.*

There's no issue as long as you do it right next time.

She clenched her teeth, but looked up and smiled at him instead.

The next day, Hermione stood in the master bedroom with Pansy, who'd just finished doing her hair as Hermione had told her about what had transpired between herself and Martin the previous day.

Pansy had been gleefully shocked, her eyes wide and her mouth slack, and Hermione hadn't been able to help herself and giggled as she'd watched her friend's reaction in the mirror.

Lucio and Martin were still in the library, halfway through that day's session.

Draco had gone off again, had said he wanted to do some research. Hermione had sent him off with a kiss that would have melted metal, had said breathlessly that she would eagerly await his return.

He'd eaten her words and affection like honey, had taken her eagerly against the wall and then left with the promise of more upon his return. Once he'd Apparated away, Hermione had cleaned herself off thoroughly in the bath. While Lucio had his lessons and then his session with Martin, Hermione had paced restlessly through the library, poring over book after book, trying to distract herself or find anything useful.

Research, Draco had told her. She snorted. Could he be any more transparent? She knew what he wanted to look up. He wanted to see if it was possible to imprison her inside one of these paintings. The thought turned her stomach.

Whether he actually wanted to do it, she wasn't certain. But she wouldn't be surprised if he kept it as another tool in his arsenal to use to keep her in check. He'd given up one of his major cards only the day before by making the Vow and promising to leave her magic untouched. It was just like him to sneak around and find something new to use against her—he simply couldn't bear to lose the upper hand, could he?

Hermione had never heard of that sort of thing being possible. Martin had told Draco as much. She wondered if he would have tried to tell her had Draco not forbid him from doing it.

You really think you can trap me again?

Well it was too late. He couldn't keep her from what she wanted. He'd let a monster loose, and she would be damned if she let him put her back in chains.

"I'm glad to see you a little happier these days," Pansy said quietly, squeezing her arm.

"He loosens his leash more and more," Hermione replied with a wry smile. "He's too arrogant, too easily flattered. He should be tightening it, instead."

"I still can't believe he's letting you sleep with someone else," Pansy said. "I'm glad for you, of course, but don't you worry it's a trick?"

"He promised not to retaliate," Hermione said. "And if he does I'll make him pay for it. He said he wants to make me happy, even if it makes him jealous. And I plan to test that."

"So he only knows about Theo?"

"Yes." Hermione gripped Pansy's hand. "I hate having to ask you to keep it from him, but it would help so much."

"I'll do my best," Pansy said. "But if he asks me directly, you know I can't lie to him. If you think I've already seen too much, I'll gladly submit to an Obliviate if it helps you."

"No," Hermione said, looking aghast, holding her friend's arm tightly. "I couldn't do that to you. I won't be that selfish."

"Do you plan to tell him, then?" Pansy asked.

Hermione gave a coy shrug of her shoulder.

"I haven't decided."

Hermione turned, began walking toward the staircase that led to the first floor.

"I think Lucio's done enough sitting for Martin today," she said. "It doesn't look too cold outside. I'm sure he'd enjoy some outdoor time."

Pansy caught on at once.

"He mentioned yesterday he misses flying," she said. "I'm sure he'd love to go for a ride. Or I might help him make a fort."

"Excellent," Hermione said, and they made their way to the library.

They ran into Neville along the way. Pansy had asked him earlier to watch over Martin and Lucio in the library.

He saw them and stopped, bowed his head.

"Your son was asking where everyone is, my Lady," he said. "I came to see who I could find."

"We were just on our way to join you," Hermione said. "I'm sure he hates sitting there for so long, I figured he'd like a break to go play outside. It looks like it might snow. He'll love that."

"Of course," Neville said, and joined them on the way back to the library.

When they arrived, Lucio perked up in his seat happily. Martin bowed to Hermione, who smiled and went to Lucio, picked him up in her arms.

"I thought we'd come in and give you a little reprieve," she announced to them both. "Lucio, would you like a break?"

He grinned. "Yes!"

Martin bowed his head. "Certainly, my Lady. You are very considerate."

Lucio wriggled as Hermione set him down.

"Come, Pansy!" he said, already rushing out of the room. "I'll get my broom! Will you throw the Quaffle for me again?"

"Yes, of course," she said, allowing herself a wide grin. She shot an expectant look over her shoulder at Neville as she walked to the door. He caught on and followed dutifully, casting one last look at Hermione and Martin before he left.

Then the library was blissfully quiet.

Martin watched her approach, a nervous, heated look in his eye.

"You won't go with them?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"I'll admit my motivation was more selfish than I let on," Hermione said, coming to a stop before him. "I just wanted you all for myself."

He blushed a little.

"I couldn't stop thinking of you," he admitted.

And then he remembered himself and went still, his eyes darting to the door at once, as if expecting to find the Lord of the house there watching.

"He's not here," she said, sensing his sudden wariness.

She stepped up to the canvas, saw Lucio's sweet little face already half-rendered, but in blocks of color that had yet to form a more intricate picture. He joined her there, standing beside her, his hands clasped behind his back.

"Are we alone?" he asked. "I have not yet seen Him today."

"He left not very long ago," Hermione said. "He said not to expect him until after dinner."

Before Martin could react, Hermione went to him, kissed him deep, her hands clutching his shoulders. Martin melted into her touch, his arms wrapped around her. When they finally broke apart, Hermione sighed, turned her attention back to the developing portrait.

"I hoped to see you again today," he murmured. His nose trailed along her jaw, inhaling her scent.

"So did I," Hermione admitted, tilting her head back to give him better access. He kissed her throat, nibbled at her earlobe, sending little shocks of electricity down her body through her nerves. She was so wet already, pulsing with excitement. Hermione sighed, turned her attention back to the developing portrait. He noticed and pulled away so as to not distract her.

"I remember when he was just a babe," she said softly. "I worried about him so much—he hardly ever cried."

“He is probably the most well-behaved child of his age I’ve ever dealt with,” Martin said. “He has a remarkable sense of self-composure for one so young.”

“I wonder if it’s because of everything he’s had to witness,” she said ruefully. ‘A farce of a marriage, corruption at every turn. I’ve worked so hard to shield him from as much of it as I could but one day he’ll learn the rest—all the things I still hid from him.’ She looked away from the painting. “I don’t want him to see me as no different to his father. Another monster.”

“Why do you think he would?” Martin asked softly, his hand on her shoulder.

“Draco isn’t the only one to have done horrible things,” she said. “I’ve killed, too. I’ve been selfish and cruel. I’m no innocent, Martin. My own son would be repulsed by me if he knew the things I’ve done. What if he thinks I manipulated him, when I only wanted him to know not to trust his father?”

“Whose blood was that on you that night?” Martin asked after a brief pause.

She saw no reason to lie.

“Theodore Nott’s. I drank from him just before returning to the hall.”

He blinked, barely able to suppress the surprise in his face.

“But he’s alive,” he said.

“There’s others I can’t say the same for,” Hermione said dully.

“You’ve killed?”

She smiled bitterly.

“Does that *really* surprise you?”

No, it didn’t.

Martin was quiet for a moment. Hermione couldn’t bear to look at him.

Would that scare him off? She almost hoped it would—if he grew to fear her in that way then it would save her the trouble of cutting him loose. To kill the affair before it got too deep. She’d been greedy enough and had only a few bites—she could bear the loss if he walked away now.

“Are you regretting anything, knowing that?” she asked softly.

He paused. Shook his head.

“I’m not here to judge. That isn’t my role here. I’m just here to paint, and to please you in any way I can.”

Hermione took his hand and squeezed it tight.

“I think Lucio is extremely lucky to have a mother who cares for him so much,” he continued. “Do all bad people trouble themselves over what someone else thinks of them? I’m sure he would try to understand your point of view, if he knew the truth of what happened to you. Perhaps he might not agree, but he hasn’t gone through the same trials. He can’t judge, just like I can’t. Nor would I want to.”

Hermione stared at him, stricken. He squeezed her hand in turn.

He'd gotten some white paint in his hair somehow, and with his sleeves rolled up and his apron tied taut against his figure she couldn't help but appreciate his appearance. She'd thought him overly thin when they'd first met but now she had observed him long enough to tell that he still had an athletic figure that bore quite a bit of lean muscle.

Was he as strong or beautiful as Draco? No. Nobody could ever compare, she was reminded. But she did not want someone like Draco. Martin was soft and gentle—if she tested him, would she find steel underneath?

Hermione reached up and instead of using magic, used her hand to wipe away the smear of paint. Martin watched her, holding his breath and unaware of it.

Time seemed to have slowed to a crawl.

Don't go any further, she told herself. *You can still turn back now and spare him. Don't be selfish.*

But hadn't she earned this? Hadn't she suffered enough to earn the right to be selfish in any capacity? She might argue it was even owed to her, considering what she'd gone through.

Take, the beast inside her hissed at the same time. *Lay your claim. Seal his fate.*

Hermione's heart pounded like the beat of a drum—they had not looked away from each other, and she feared he knew her dilemma. His eyes were intent but he stayed absolutely still, waiting for her to move or speak. She felt her control snapping.

He doesn't deserve this, she said to herself.

Hermione pulled her hand away slowly. He had taken a step forward.

He wants it as much as you do. He knows the risk, the beast crowed. *You already set this in motion. You cannot take it back now.*

Suddenly bold, he raised his hand to take her chin gently, tilt her head up. His thumb brushed over her lower lip. For once, his hand wasn't shaking.

That small contact turned the tide.

They rushed to close the gap between themselves, their mouths pressing together in the next instant. Hermione's talons had returned and latched into his clothes, tearing holes in them but she was careful not to harm him. If he noticed he didn't seem to care. He had her face in his hands and was kissing her deep, groaning at the contact of their bodies.

Hermione made a motion behind her back with her hand and locked the doors of the library so they would not be disturbed. Fire blazed inside her. Every touch of his hand was a fresh wave and though it might burn her, she wanted more.

"Are you sure?" he asked, panting for breath when they broke apart.

Hermione tilted her head, gave him a daring look.

"Are you?"

He nodded without hesitation. That was enough for her.

“Then don’t question me.”

She pushed him down onto the same chaise she’d been forced to pose atop of for her portrait. He landed backward on it with a grunt and she straddled him, draping herself over him, her hands exploring his form hungrily.

Martin had managed to wrestle off his apron as Hermione had got on top of him. She took the collar of his shirt and tore it open, nuzzled at his throat eagerly, her lips and nose tickling his skin. Martin breathed in the scent of her hair, his hands grasping at her hips.

“I think about you a lot, you know,” she said softly, between pressing kisses to his chest.

He swallowed. “Do you?”

Hermione settled herself comfortably on his thighs, her hands going to untuck his shirt from his trousers and then moving on to unbutton them.

“When Draco fucks me, all I can think about is you,” she said, and sensed the shock that rippled through him. “I imagine you there instead of him, and it drives me wild.”

His hands were working the ties on the back of her gown, fumbling from the shaking of his fingers. Hermione aided him, tapping it with her wand to bare herself to him. The library was a little cold but she didn’t shiver—the heat in Martin’s gaze was enough to warm her. Suspended in disbelief and want, he stared at her in total silence for a long moment, his hands gently trailing over her skin, admiring her thoroughly.

“If I could paint you like this,” he said softly. “And get it just right, it would be the only thing I’d look at for the rest of my life.”

Hermione found herself blushing.

His hand stroked her abdomen, trailing upwards to cup and knead at her breast. The touch brought a wave of gooseflesh over her—Hermione shivered, arching into him. Her nipple hardened, aching with sharp need. Her hands worked at undoing his trousers, fumbling the button more than once. His shirt was already rumpled and creased but it didn’t matter. She would make sure later that there’d been no sign they were together.

He bent forward, took the tip of her breast in his mouth, sucking it lightly before letting it come out. Hermione gasped, leaning into him for more. He kissed her nipple, then did the same to the other. Hermione’s hands were burrowing into his hair, pressing him closer to her. His hands were tight on the small of her back, roving down to grasp at her ass, and then after a moment’s hesitation, slid down further and between to probe at her intimately.

Hermione bit her lip and whimpered, pressing herself against him. She was wet and ready. He felt that and met her eye—she nodded, suspended herself on her knees as he took his cock and aligned it to enter her.

His head was buried in her shoulder, his mouth pressing kisses to her clavicle, then her throat. Hermione let her head fall back, her skin burning under his touch.

“Yes,” she whispered heavily. He was stroking his cock along her slit, making her insides squirm with want. Hermione moaned, traced her hands over his chest. “I need you now. Please.”

He adjusted himself so the tip of his cock nudged at her opening, and without hesitation Hermione eased herself onto him—perhaps a little faster than she should have, but that dominant hunger within her could take no more waiting. He filled her delightfully—they both hissed. Hermione kissed him, already moving on him, rolling and grinding her hips.

“God,” Martin gasped. He clutched at her waist, stabilizing her as she moved. “Hermione —”

“Yes?” she panted, slowing.

He gripped her then, and in a rush of movement he flipped them both so now he was on top. He peppered her face with kisses.

“If you keep doing that,” he said breathlessly, “I’m going to come immediately. Allow me to take the pace.”

She nodded, a deep flush covering her face, and Martin began at once, settling over her comfortably, his arms braced on either side of her, thrusting in and out, stroking her from within. Hermione moaned, wrapped her arms around him, clutching him close.

Hermione met Draco dutifully at the door when he returned. He saw her there and grinned, swept her into his hold and hoisted her over his shoulder, setting course at once for the bedroom.

Hermione lied on her front atop Draco, her head resting on her arm, lazily stroking at his chest. His seed still leaked from her. She felt his heart beat against her chest, and silently wondered to herself if there would be a day when it would stop.

His watched her with a sated, lazy smile on his face. His cock was flaccid and spent, and he bore the marks of her bite on his throat.

“I ought to stay away from the house for longer, if it makes you this ravenous,” he remarked. His hand was on her lower back, holding her to him.

Despite the fact that she had her full weight on him he supported her ably, and seemed unaffected by it. She saw him training, sometimes, in the manor. It was rare, but she’d also seen him flying on his old broom outside on clear mornings.

“Show me again,” he said, his hand squeezing her bottom.

Hermione shifted her hand and let him take it to inspect her talons. His touch was delicate. For good measure, she shifted the rest of her hand until it resembled the scaly claw of a giant, murderous avian creature.

He sucked in a breath.

“Incredible,” he murmured. “Can you do anything else?”

She shook her head.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m sure that will change soon enough. You must keep trying. I’m sure you can train this power to be something incredible, indeed.”

If only you knew, she thought to herself, hiding her smile into his chest.

27. Stolen Time

A/N:

As of this point we'll be seeing more time skips to keep the story progressing at a good pace. If the first half of this chapter feels a little rushed it's bc it was. I literally just added it so apologies if messy, will fix a bit later but too tired now.

Please read important chapter notes at the end! Also a reminder that I upload more quickly through AO3.

Only a handful of chapters left!

The following morning, Pansy waited on Lord and Lady Malfoy after they had awoken.

Lord Malfoy was already washed and dressed, nodding at her as she entered.

"Where is Longbottom?" he asked.

"The tutors will be arriving shortly, my Lord," Pansy said, bowing. "I sent him to let them in. Lucio is just finishing his breakfast."

"Very well."

He turned to the mirror, brushing a hand through his hair, parting it in just the way he liked.

Lady Hermione exited the closet, securing the clasp of a heavy cloak about her throat. Underneath, she wore a decidedly Muggle outfit—trainers and dark jeans, a flattering red blouse.

Lord Malfoy noticed this and gave her a look.

"What's this?" he asked in a disproving tone.

"Is there a problem, Draco?" she asked, undaunted.

"Where did all this come from?" he asked, gesturing to her clothing. "That's not how my Lady should dress."

"Why? Are we expecting a visit?" she asked. "I see no problem with this."

"Go back and change, my love," he said, gentling his tone. "I won't have you looking like a common muggle in our home."

"Looking like a common muggle is exactly what I wanted," she said. "Seeing as I want to go see my parents today."

He paused for a moment as if he wanted to argue, and then thought better of it.

"You didn't mention this last night."

"I woke up and I felt it was time, Draco," she said softly. There was a heaviness to her voice that pulled at Pansy's heart. "It's been far too long. I can't stand not knowing how they are. I have to make sure they're alright."

He went to her.

"You're going alone?" he seemed displeased by the notion.

"Pansy is coming with me," Hermione said. "Neville can look after Lucio."

Pansy nodded. The day suddenly seemed a little brighter.

"I suppose," Draco said. "Do you think he can manage, Pansy?"

"He's too tightly bound to rebel, my Lord," Pansy offered. "He's been nothing short of obedient since he took the Vow. I'm not worried about leaving him in charge for a little while."

The Dark Lord was studying his wife intently, as if scanning her face for tells that she was lying.

"Really, Draco," Hermione said. "I need to see them. I know they're still alive, but they're old. I have to make sure they're well."

"Then I won't dream of keeping you from it if that's what you want." He thought for a moment. "If you wish, my Lady, I'll undo the Obliviate. You deserve a happy reunion."

The rest of his sentence was unspoken, so Pansy could not hear it, but to Hermione it was clear as a bell.

As long as you come back home to me, he finished.

He had wrapped his arms around her, holding her to his chest.

"No," she said. Pansy hated seeing that sadness in her gaze. "I think it best not to."

Draco held her tight, relishing the feel of her soft body so willingly surrendering to his affection.

"Well, let me know if you change your mind," he said, reluctantly letting her go after a moment when she began to pull away. "If they're in need of anything, send word and I'll arrange to help at once."

At that, Lady Hermione smiled beautifully, her eyes shining. It made his heart skip a beat to see. She touched his arm, squeezed it.

"Thank you, Draco."

And she meant it.

"Will you be gone all day?" Lucio asked.

"I don't think so," Hermione said. "I'm just going to visit your grandparents, my love."

"But can't I go with you?" he asked, his eyes huge and pleading. "I've never even met them!"

A fact that always filled her with shame.

How can I take you to meet them when they don't even know who you are? She asked internally. *They still see me as a stranger. Not their long-lost daughter.*

"I promise you'll meet them one day," Hermione said. "Soon. They'll be overjoyed to meet you, I'm sure of it. But today isn't the right time, darling."

Visibly upset, Lucio pulled away from her arms.

"Is it because you're embarrassed of me?" his voice wavered.

"No," Hermione said at once, alarmed. "Never. What makes you think that?"

Lucio rubbed at his eye. Behind him was the door to the nursery, where Neville and the tutors waited patiently.

"Father acts like it, sometimes," he said. "Like I disappoint him. He tells me not to fidget and gets mad if I get bad marks. I always have to stay here. And I never get to go out and make friends."

"Don't you ever think that, Lucio," Hermione said heatedly. "Darling, we've always been so proud of you. So ridiculously proud."

"Your father... he has high expectations," she continued. "You've seen how he corrects me sometimes."

Lucio nodded.

"He always wants perfection, because he can't see the value in what he already has. That's his own fault, not yours, Lucio. Do you understand? That doesn't mean he doesn't love you."

The matter of Draco's love for his son was not a contested point. Hermione had feared and suspected him of feigning his affection for their son but after several years had finally allowed herself to believe that he did indeed love him.

The question was how much.

If they had another son who turned out more like Draco, would he play a game of favorites? Would he cast aside any other children they might have who didn't fit his ideal? Was that why he was so insistent on conceiving again, so he might find a (in his eyes) more suitable heir?

He always seemed caring and affectionate around his son. But those questions loomed in Hermione's mind the more he spoke of having another.

He doesn't deserve him if he can't see how wonderful he is, she thought to herself.

She held her hand out, staring intently at Lucio's face. Rare was the occasion when Lucio was this upset with her. It broke her heart to feel.

Thankfully, he nodded, stepped forward and took it, wiping a tear from his cheek.

If Draco saw him crying, he would have stern words for him. Hermione was glad he wasn't there.

"I'm proud of you in so many ways," she said gently. "Because you're clever, and funny, and kind and so many other things. You are the best of your father and I, and we know you'll achieve great things when you're older. I love you just the way you are, my love. Never forget that."

She wiped the tear rolling down his other cheek.

"Even if you don't eat your asparagus and if you cheat at races."

That did the trick. He laughed, but went somber again.

"I can't take you to see your grandparents, because they don't know they have a daughter. And if I went to see them they wouldn't know that I am that daughter. Or that they have a grandson"

Lucio touched her cheek.

"Did Father do something to them?" he asked in a hushed voice.

That stung at her heart even more—that by now Lucio knew enough about Draco's true nature that he could guess such a thing.

She shook her head.

"No, sweetheart. *I* did. I erased their memories, made them forget about me."

Lucio stared at her, horrified.

"*Why*, mummy?"

"To keep them safe," she said. "From your father. From other enemies. I was going to run away to help fight in the war against Voldemort. My plan was that if I survived, I would come back and break the spell. But I was kidnapped before I could ever go back home."

"And then father made you stay here."

She nodded.

"Years passed. He took me to see them again, and he offered to restore their memories. But it's too complicated. I don't want them to know the pain of me being missing for so long. I thought it would be best to pretend I never existed."

"That's why they don't know about me," Lucio said. He processed this for a moment. "Then why visit them now?"

"They're old," Hermione said bleakly. "And I'll never stop loving them. I want to make sure they're well."

And if we manage to escape then I'll finally break the Obliviate, she promised silently. And I'll beg for their forgiveness, and I'll introduce you to them. Just like I should have after you were born.

It was no trouble at all to find the Grangers (now Wilkins) family. Draco had, of course, saved their address years ago to keep tabs on them. They still lived in the same neat brick house Hermione remembered from her youth—it stared back at her now blankly as she stood with Pansy in the backyard, as if it too could not remember her.

Cloaked under a powerful Disillusionment charm, they stood in the tidy garden, a warm swaying breeze fluttering their cloaks about their legs.

“Just as I remember it,” Hermione said softly. So many memories came forth as she looked around the areas she used to play in.

They feel like someone else’s memories.

She carried a heavy bag slung over her shoulder.

“Will you want to go in?” Pansy asked.

“First, I wanted to bury this,” Hermione said, going to the farthest corner of the garden, where a thick bush stood squat against the fence. It was browning, sure to die and wither away in the coming months. For now, enough leaves clung to its branches that it obscured the ground below it.

She slid the bag to the ground, straightened, and found a spot that would remain mostly unseen. Held her hand over it and let her magic do the work, watching the soil shift to form a medium-sized hole in the ground that went several feet below the surface.

The bag was thick and sealed with magic—needed to be, considering it held that cursed gemstone gown Draco had had made for her, and various other costly jewelry pieces within. All baubles Draco had given her over the years that she hadn’t cared for. His lavish ornaments were so numerous that she’d been able to take as many as she could and not leave a dent in her jewelry box, confident that he wouldn’t notice. The more meaningful pieces, such as the emerald choker and the golden armbands and circlet he’d recently given her, had to stay behind, as she was sure they were still fresh in his memory.

A fortune buried underground for safekeeping.

Pansy didn’t know what she was burying. It was all wrapped so carefully, and although her curiosity was great, she knew better than to ask. Hermione, for her part, never offered the information. She had been alone when she’d pilfered her own jewels on purpose, to keep it secret.

Once the parcel had been carefully deposited deep down in that hole, Hermione buried it quickly, kicked about some of that fresh soil to make sure the area looked as natural as possible. Situated under that heavy bush, nobody would give the area a second glance, but she wanted to be as careful as possible.

She stood upright, sighing.

“There.”

Pansy took her hand and squeezed it.

“They’re inside,” she said gently. “I saw one of them moving around in the kitchen.”

Hermione's eyes instantly focused on those windows, a raw, desperate hunger in them.

There was nobody there now, but she could hear them—their heartbeats, muffled conversation. A gentle, loving laugh—her mother's.

Distantly, her heart ached.

Monica Wilkins (formerly Mrs. Granger) opened the door to find two friendly but hesitant looking women on the doorstep. They were both lovely and seemed very close, judging by how they were holding hands.

"Hello," she said, smiling. Her knees felt brittle that day due to the low temperature and it hurt to stand for long periods of time—she'd forgotten her cane in the kitchen. "May I help you?"

"Monica," the one on the left said. She was aching lovely and held a heavy aura of grief about her. Something about her seemed very familiar but Monica was sure she'd never seen her before, though the woman certainly seemed to recognize *her*. It was clear in her eyes and the way she already knew her name. "I'm so glad to see you. May we come in?"

Two strangers asking to enter another's house should always be met with a firm *no*, but there was something about them that Monica trusted immediately. It was a strange compelling sensation in her heart that she couldn't explain—a brief flash of pain hit her temple. She hoped it wasn't a migraine—both she and her husband had suffered from those more regularly over the past few years.

"Yes, of course," Monica said, holding the door open wider to allow them through. "Please come in."

"Is your husband here?" the woman on the left asked. She was looking directly toward the stairs—Wendell always spent the mornings in the study, poring over the newspaper. Somehow, Monica got the sense this strange woman knew this exactly. This didn't alarm her—strangely, it comforted her instead. "Can you call him down?"

"Wendell," Monica called. "We've got visitors, darling."

"Who is it?" was Wendell's muffled reply.

"Just come down, darling," Monica said, laughing a little. Strange—why did she feel so content?

"We don't mean to trouble you," the woman on the left said. She was watching Monica, wondering why she was not afraid.

"I know you don't, dear," Monica replied honestly. That seemed to baffle the woman on the left. Her frown deepened—she looked around suddenly as if something had just occurred to her. She scanned the room, looking a little lost.

The other woman hadn't said a word. She merely stood by waiting, her hands at her front. Monica smiled at her and she smiled back warmly but said nothing else.

“Would you like some tea?” Monica asked. Her temple smarted again, and her knees really needed that cane, but she didn’t want to be rude. Didn’t really feel the pain anyway, when she felt so light.

“Please don’t trouble yourself,” the woman on the left said. She went to Monica and took her hand. “Why don’t you sit? I’ll go make the tea.”

“Oh—” Monica allowed herself to be led to the couch and sat down gratefully. Her long white hair, braided along her back, swung to her front as she sat. She looked up at the other woman and gestured for her to join her, which she did. Wendell was just coming carefully down the stairs. There was the sound of someone moving about the kitchen. Pansy heard the clicking of the gas dial.

“Well, what’s all the fuss?” Wendell was asking as he entered the den. “Who’s calling on us this early?”

He saw Pansy and stopped—Pansy smiled at him awkwardly.

“I don’t think we’ve met,” he said. “Hello.”

“Hello,” she said, standing again to bow on instinct and then halted, thought better of it, and sat down again, her face going red. “It’s very nice to meet you both.”

Whatever strangeness that had got hold of Monica had spread to Wendell—his gaze was curious but friendly as he looked at her. Hermione must have cast some sort of spell or charm without informing her. They must both be under an Imperio, then, to warrant this sort of behavior when inviting two total strangers into their home.

“The same to you,” he said. “What’s your name?”

Pansy hesitated.

“My name is Pansy,” she said, not seeing the need for an alias.

“I’m Wendell,” he said, and went to stand beside his wife. “This is my dear wife, Monica.”

“And your friend back there?” Monica asked. “What’s her name? She looks so familiar—I could swear I’ve seen her before.”

Pansy didn’t know what to answer. Her mouth was open but no words had formed.

“She reminds me of Monica’s late mother,” Wendell replied. “Wonderful woman, God rest her soul.”

Monica nodded enthusiastically. “She really does.”

Hermione saved her by coming back into the den with four mugs of steaming tea held carefully in her hands. The mugs must have been scalding her skin but she didn’t so much as grimace. She took one to Monica first, who accepted it gratefully.

“Jasmine,” Monica said, recognizing the scent instantly. She had it every morning, and somehow the stranger had known that, and where to find it, without being told. Again, that warmed her heart and she wasn’t entirely sure why.

Wendell was already drinking from his. Hermione brought the second to last mug to Pansy, and sat down beside her.

“My name is Jean,” Hermione said at last. “You might not remember me. We met once, in France... a long time ago.”

To her surprise, Monica nodded, somehow instantly having remembered.

“Oh, yes!” Monica said brightly. “I think I remember. It’s so faint. You were with a man. You looked so beautiful together.”

“I came in right after you left,” Wendell said, putting his mug down. “But my Monica told me about it. Very curious. How are you?”

Hermione/Jean smiled and shook her head, seeming a little incredulous. She glanced at Pansy briefly, giving her an inquiring look—Pansy looked back haplessly, not knowing what she meant. She gave a small shrug. Frowning slightly, Hermione turned back to her parents.

“I’m more concerned about *you*,” she said. “I’m sorry it took so long to come visit. How are you? Please, tell me everything.”

The Grangers were so trusting—could they really remember Hermione from a short encounter from years ago? Pansy had never heard of this story. All this time, she’d known Hermione had erased herself from their memories, but not the rest. Perplexed, she watched their expressions, wondering if they were maybe lying and instead secretly terrified and unsure of what to do. Perhaps they were slowly beginning to realize they should have asked more questions before letting them inside. But her study of the two elder Grangers revealed no such concern—they seemed content and wholly at ease. If they truly were under an Imperius, their eyes would reflect that. The spell always gave a distant, flat quality to the gaze of whoever was under its power... but there was no sign of that here.

Maybe my Lady simply used a Confundus on them, Pansy reasoned, cradling her mug of tea in her lap. *I can see why she wouldn’t want to enchant them any further than they already are.*

Things were not as dire as Hermione had feared. As her parents relayed their situation to she and Pansy, she felt the tension in her shoulders slide away like sifting sand.

The mere sight of them, aged and silver-haired, hurt incredibly to see. She was glad to feel that hurt. Felt like she deserved to feel that pain. She was the one who’d done this to them, after all. The lines on their faces that she remembered had deepened, and more had formed. Their skin sagged now, and their eyes were tired. Her father kept readjusting in his seat, wincing as though there was pain in his spine, and her mother clearly favored one leg over the other.

They still lived comfortably, according to them. The house was theirs and their car about a decade old, but fully paid off. Her mother needed medical consultation for her wrists, as she suspected she was developing arthritis. And it took some prodding, but her father finally admitted that as the years passed the pain in his spine had worsened, and he had considered getting an operation to relieve it, but couldn’t afford the procedure.

Hermione listened to them raptly, conversing with them as if they were long-lost friends rather than a long-separated family.

The framed photos along the walls showed them at every stage of life—she felt her heart sink a little, staring at the ones she knew she'd once been included in, before wiping their was one question she had yet to ask, one that burned at her now-she saw no children in any of those photos and yet the last time she'd seen her mother she had been pregnant. What happened? What more had she missed? Brother or sister, they would be younger than Lucio.

It never gets any easier.

There is no room for pain or tears, the voice said to her. Do what you must.

The voice was right. She had felt that flash of pain at first seeing them, had felt that old instinct to clutch them and sink to her knees and sob, but there was indeed no time.

Soon, we'll live as a true family again. If I can manage to break free. We'll make up for lost time, every second of it. I'll have my true family.

She felt heavy. Weighed down.

Everything hung in the balance. All these internal promises depended on her success, but this was a safeguard. If she failed to free herself, there was the treasure in the garden. It would set them up comfortably for the rest of their lives. They would want for nothing.

And if I can at least manage to set Lucio free, that treasure will be more than enough to cover his own needs too. But if we all get out—we'll need to find a new home somewhere he can't find us.

Nothing could make up for what she had done to them or the time they had lost. But she could try.

Briefly, she wondered what Draco would think and say if he were here now, sitting beside her.

He had already offered to help them. Had already been throughout the years, but this was different. This was not an annual sum to see them through without struggling, as was the standard. She'd always been grateful for that. As cruel as he was, he was generous in other regards. It made her head spin, sometimes. If she asked he might be more than happy to send whatever funds she asked for—but he might ask questions first. He might grow wary. She wanted to avoid that.

When they were done talking, Hermione rose and took all the mugs back to the kitchen, washed them up with a tap of her hand. She took her mother's cane back to her, and they touched hands as she did so. Monica took her hand suddenly.

"And how is your husband?" she asked, staring deep into Hermione's eyes. "You haven't mentioned him once."

"He's well," Hermione said, grinning. "I'm going to ask for a separation."

Wendell had offered to take them for a tour of the garden. Despite his back pain, it was a hobby he had continued to keep throughout his life. He wanted to show Pansy the lot of pansies he'd tended to that summer.

Meanwhile, Hermione stayed behind in the kitchen with her mother.

"It's so kind of you to help us," Monica was saying. "We can't thank you enough. But you really shouldn't trouble yourself. We take good care of ourselves. We've got many years in us yet."

"Years I want to spend with you," Hermione replied, unable to help herself. She felt the urge to cover her mouth over the outburst, but repressed it. She cleared her throat.

"Do you think the separation will go badly?" Monica asked, concerned.

Hermione chose not to answer.

"Do you have any children?" she asked after a pause, unable to bear not knowing anymore. "I seem to recall when we met, you were pregnant."

"I was," Monica smiled sadly, nodding. "Our first. A girl. She passed a few days after I gave birth. There were complications. Her name was Beatrice."

It was like the breath had been sucked from her lungs. And then a flash of rage filled her, so hot it threatened to burn her from the inside out.

Haven't they suffered enough?

It took a moment and a great deal of effort to overcome that rage, to part that fog.

"I'm-I'm so sorry," Hermione said. "I didn't mean—"

"It's alright," Monica said serenely. She was smiling, but her eyes were a little pained. "We were quite surprised by the pregnancy-I was 43. We knew there were risks, but we still hoped. I carried her for ten months and I held her for three days until she stopped breathing. She was so beautiful. I treasure that time still, and I'm grateful I got to see her and hear her."

"Beatrice is a beautiful name," Hermione said. Her heart was pounding. She reached out and embraced Monica, who accepted it gratefully though she didn't cry.

I had a sister, Hermione thought. I had a sister. For three days, I had a sister, and her name was Beatrice.

With a heavy heart, Hermione hugged her parents goodbye at the door, allowing herself to squeeze them as tightly as she dared. They didn't seem to mind-in fact, they seemed delighted. Pansy made to shake their hands but Monica pulled her in for a hug instead, and surprised but touched, she returned the sentiment.

"It was so lovely to meet you," Monica said to Pansy. "Seeing as you're a friend of Jean's, you're welcome to come back any time."

"You take care, you two," Wendell said to them both. "We'd love to see you both again anytime."

"I'll do my best to make another visit," Hermione said, her smile wavering a little. "As soon as I can."

"If he tries to fight you over the separation," Monica added, "you have our number. Give us a ring. We'll come get you."

"Fast as lightning," Wendell added, nodding. "And we'll bring the fuzz with us if he's got a mind to violence."

Struck, Hermione stared at her parents. Their eyes were bright with tears but neither seemed to realize it, nor could Hermione notice, for her own were, too.

"It means the world to me to hear you say that," Hermione said. "Thank you."

The last time she had seen her parents, she'd spoken only to her mother, and the memory of the encounter had almost immediately faded from her mother's mind... only to resurface years later, and it had struck her as so odd that she'd finally shared it with Wendell. They'd thought not much of it until now, as they watched the mysterious Jean walk down the street with Pansy.

Monica's happiness soured quickly into fear-there was that smarting at her temple again-Wendell was already going back inside, holding the door open for her. She didn't dare move, and kept her eyes on the two women walking away, not even letting herself blink, because last time the memory had faded almost instantly and she was afraid it would happen again.

Why did that happen? Who was this strange woman, really? She really looked so much like her own mother but as far as she knew, they were not related.

"Aren't you coming in, love?" Wendell asked. "It's getting colder out."

Monica's hand gripped her cane until her knuckles felt like they would burst from her skin.

"Not yet," she said. "I needed some cool air. I'll go in in a minute."

"Right you are, then," Wendell said, and arranged the door carefully so it wouldn't bump into her. "It's a shame they wouldn't stay for lunch-I thought I'd make pesto."

Monica didn't reply but it didn't matter, as he was already heading toward the kitchen.

The two women were just reaching the end of the street by now-it was hard to make them out behind the tall fence they'd just walked past. Monica couldn't see very well at that distance anymore, but she refused to take her eyes off them anyway, still afraid that some intruding force would rip that memory from her.

Jean was no mere stranger. She was growing more certain by the minute. And Jean was not her real name. She could sense that much. But her memory failed her, hard as she flipped through it. There was only that memory of Jean in France, when that handsome blond man had been watching them carefully from afar. She remembered nothing of what they'd said to each other-only that she had been filled with the greatest joy and sadness she'd ever known at the same time. She remembered holding Jean's cheek in her palm, and the pained, loving look Jean had given her.

Who are you really? Monica thought. *Why do I know I know you as someone else? What did we say to each other?*

The women were gone, out of sight. Monica felt her hand loosen around the grip of her cane and exhaled slowly.

Why can't I remember?

Standing there on the stoop of her home, she'd never felt so lost.

Hermione and Pansy apparated to the little village not far from the manor, having decided they wanted to walk the rest of the way.

"They are very nice people," Pansy said.

Hermione smiled. "It felt so good, to see them again. I feared the worst—but I'm so relieved."

"I suggested to your father to dig up the bushes in the summer," Pansy said. "As you said, my Lady."

"Thank you," Hermione said. Her expression turned thoughtful. "Did you cast an Imperius on them? They were unbelievably trusting from the start. It's true I met them before years ago, but I didn't think they'd remember. I only spoke to them for a minute then. Still a stranger, yet they let us both in."

Startled, Pansy looked at Hermione.

"No," she said. "I thought *you'd* cast one right away. Or I thought you'd cast a Confundus."

Hermione had gone pale. "I didn't cast a single thing on them. I thought about it—I meant to, but I couldn't bear to do it."

The significance of the Grangers' behavior settled over them. Hermione shook her head in disbelief.

"It's fading," she said in a hushed, shocked voice. "The original Obliviate. Or they must have grown resistant somehow. They must be starting to remember."

"How much do you think they know?" Pansy asked, her hand over her mouth. "How is this possible?"

"I don't know," Hermione said, her thoughts reeling. "I didn't actually think she'd remember the last time we met but she did. Maybe their memories are a little muddled, but they recognized *me* by sight, if not by name or relation. That might be why they trusted us so easily."

"This is remarkable," Pansy said.

And all the more reason to try my hardest to get back to them as a free woman, Hermione thought. *If they manage to remember me in any capacity, I want to be there to ease their pain.*

It had begun to snow. It fell in thick drifts, obscuring the land around them so it was hard to see, but inwardly, she felt the pull of the manor, like an arm extending from it to pull them back into its fold. They had secured their cloaks around themselves, and were thankfully shielded from the brunt of the cold.

Hermione liked the feel of the snow against her face, although she regretted her choice of footwear for the day. She tilted her head up to the sky, feeling those cold, wet kisses on her skin.

“You know, He’s granted me a vacation,” Pansy said after a few minutes of walking in silence.

Since that interesting conversation with Lord Malfoy, she’d wondered how to approach Hermione about it. Wondered what her reaction would be. Would she be angry? Upset? Would she think she was abandoning her? As much as Pansy knew she deserved that time off, she couldn’t help but fear the thought of leaving for so long a period. Awful things could happen any time—what if she returned to a wreck? To dead bodies strewn about? To empty, accusing eyes that said, *I was alone, and I needed you?*

There had already been one or two nightmares related to that fear. Pansy tried to assure herself with the knowledge that Neville would be there in her place while she was gone, but it gave her little comfort. He didn’t know what was at stake. These horrors were still very fresh to him—could he be counted on to serve when the next one struck?

“He says I may choose to leave whenever I want. Four months to do as I please.”

She slipped suddenly on watery bit of ice—Hermione caught her immediately, helped her regain her footing.

“That’s great. You deserve it,” Hermione said earnestly. If the news upset her, she hid it well. “When will you take it?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” Pansy replied. “I wanted to wait to hear your response.”

“I won’t lie,” Hermione said after a slight hesitation. “I’ll really miss you. And the thought of not having you with me in the manor scares me. But it really is overdue. It would be extremely selfish of me to ask you not to take it.”

“But I wanted to tell you first,” Pansy insisted, stopping in her tracks. “Because I might be able to help you from the other side. Is there any way I can help you?”

Hermione stopped too, staring at Pansy with wide eyes.

Lucio was the first thought that came into her mind. He was the main priority. He, at any cost, had to escape the manor.

“My son,” she said. “If you could help me get him out, I’d be eternally grateful.”

“Tell me what to do,” Pansy said, “and I’ll do it.”

She met Draco in his study, walking in without knocking at the door. He was in his chair writing a letter, it seemed. He looked up and saw her, his eyes brightening.

“My Lady,” he said. “You’re back already?”

She went to him. He pushed back from his desk, making to stand, but she stopped him short by sitting in his lap and wrapping her arms around his neck, kissed him passionately.

He gave in immediately, his hands cupping her face, applying pressure. Her mouth opened to him and his tongue slid in.

He was hard in an instant—she ground against his lap.

“Fuck,” he moaned. “Firebird.” He pulled away with some effort, scanned her face intently.

“How are they?” he asked. “How did it go?”

“They’re well,” she said. “Comfortable. But they need more help than usual—they need operations—I want them to be taken care of.”

“Say the number and I’ll send it to them at once,” he said at once. “I’ll send them enough gold to build a palace if they so wish.”

That pleased her immensely. Hermione nestled into his chest. Her breasts pressed against him. Draco smiled, held her tight against him.

“It never gets any easier,” she murmured. “It still hurts to see them.”

“I know, sweetheart,” he said, stroking her hair. “Remember, Hermione: if you want them in your life and their memories restored, just tell me. It isn’t too late.”

You do not need his help, the voice whispered to her. She agreed.

“You’re so good to me, Draco,” Hermione said softly. “I don’t deserve it.”

“Nonsense,” he chuckled, though her words tickled his pride most deliciously. “My good little firebird deserves the world. I’ll do anything for you, sweetling. You know that.”

He kissed the top of her head. His hands began to wander.

Hermione stopped his hands in their tracks.

“Later,” she said with a raised brow. “After we’ve seen our son.”

“Very well,” Draco conceded, lifting her in his arms and rising from his chair. “And then it’s straight back to the bedroom for us, and you’ll change into something much more befitting for the wife of a Dark Lord.”

He hoisted her over his shoulder in one swift, easy movement. Hermione yelped in surprise, laughing a little.

“And then I’ll tear it off you with my teeth,” he promised, before setting off to exit his study.

[one month later]

“How do you bear it?” Neville asked Pansy Parkinson a month later, when they were making the rounds around the manor one day, walking around the place for having nothing better to do at the moment. They were in the library now and the last of that evening’s sunset had long faded and the lamps were on, bathing the huge room in a warm yellow light. The painter had gone for the day but his workstation remained, that huge and finished portrait of Lord Malfoy watching them from its location, newly varnished and still drying, placed by the open window.

Lady Hermione was in the nursery with her son, reading to him before bedtime. They had left her there and didn’t presently know where Lord Malfoy was. He’d left after lunch without divulging where he was off to and had yet to return.

Neville *relished* these hours when Malfoy was not home. The heavy atmosphere seemed to lighten by just a fraction, and the great tangle of dread in his chest unspooled a little, as he didn’t have to anticipate being summoned by his new master at any moment.

The manor was always so quiet. He hated it, longing for the luxury his freedom had afforded him of being able to go anywhere he pleased and hide himself among throngs of people. His living quarters might be grander than what he’d had before, strangely enough, but there was never anything to do in his spare time—what meager amounts of it he had.

Who was there to talk to? Lord Malfoy still prohibited him from spending too much time around Hermione. If he and Malfoy were alone, Malfoy liked to make snide comments, trying to provoke him into retaliating. For all his efforts to not let himself be affected, he was always a hair’s width from breaking. From the predatory gleam in Lord Malfoy’s eye, he knew it, too.

Everything’s a trap in this fucking house, he thought, resentfully rubbing at the Dark Lord’s mark on his wrist.

George was absent much of the time, either on some secret mission for Malfoy or staying well away from the manor. And Luna, poor Luna, was still chained up somewhere in this manor. It was all he could think about at night. He had tried in vain to discreetly search for a door to the dungeon while he and Parkinson were doing their duties, but never came up with anything useful. At night, he’d tried to leave his room and search in secret, but his door was locked from the outside, preventing him from leaving.

Parkinson tucked some hair behind her ear. Her face was blank. It was *always* blank. Neville had noticed from the start that she rarely showed emotion aside from small, curated smiles or frowns and nothing deeper than that. She was implacably polite and deferent when she spoke to Lord Malfoy, always acting on his bidding or summons at once. Lord Malfoy was continuously imperial in his attitudes toward Parkinson, but Neville had seen straight away that he trusted her to quite a great degree to have her steward his home and run his affairs behind the scenes, and he was never cruel to her. Parkinson knew her job inside and out and did it extremely well, never once complaining of her burdens or her master, as though she were some sort of automaton designed only to work and never to feel.

That she did feel anything at all had been proved to Neville eventually. He’d learned that she was different with Lucio and even Hermione. With the boy, her face was as lively and expressive as he had remembered it being in Hogwarts. Neville was frequently dispatched to stay at Pansy’s side when the Dark Lord had no need of him, and it was often enough that

Neville would find himself in the nursery with the other two, listening to Pansy interact with the little lord. During those first few occasions he'd seen at once that Pansy cared about the child just from the way she spoke to him.

That hadn't surprised him. The boy was the son of her employer—she could be nothing but kind and patient with him. So he had disregarded that observation, at first.

The boy was always looking at him curiously and not flinching when Neville inevitably caught him. The Dark Lord had prohibited them from speaking one on one, however, so when Pansy saw little Lucio open his mouth she would fire a warning glance and he would sigh and look away, unspoken questions still burning in the air around him.

It reminded him so much of Hermione, that small action.

Neville had been perplexed at first to realize that the Dark Lord didn't want him speaking to his son. Why allow them in such close proximity then? Clearly, he did not trust him to remain alone for long periods of time in the manor, hence why he often saddled him to Parkinson's hip. He also likely didn't want him telling the boy his version of Lord Malfoy's origin. Which led him to wonder—how much, if at all, did the boy know about the relationship between his parents, and how it had come about?

Lord Malfoy didn't want him near Hermione yet, and that this was just another part of his punishment—he was to be invisible, was that it? He was supposed to despair at the sight of his enemy's heir flourishing?

It didn't have the effect the Dark Lord sought. Well, not to the fullest degree, anyway.

It was disturbing and saddening to know the truth of the boy's conception. But from what Neville had seen so far, Hermione clearly loved the boy with all her might and did not hold it against him.

The more Neville observed the boy, his hope climbed a fraction higher. The boy was good-hearted, and nothing like his father. Neville found himself constantly wondering how the child could hope to remain that way in this house—was there a chance of him getting out, as Hermione desperately wanted?

Parkinson's reply broke him from his unending train of thought.

"Years of constant exposure has dulled the edge, I suppose," she was saying softly, having taken a moment to gather her response. "There's nothing I can do. I foolishly took a Vow without knowing the full story, and I pay for it every day when I see what he does to her. I bear it the only way I can—day by day, making sure I help her in any way I can without disobeying Him."

Neville frowned. The fire had come on in the hearth—already roaring and crackling loudly, contained though it was.

"How often do you want to...?" he asked, not yet daring to allow himself to say the word.

Disobey.

Parkinson might have Malfoy's trust, but Neville knew without a doubt he was not in the same position. He was plagued constantly by the intrusive paranoia that Malfoy was

monitoring him somehow, that he would know if he dared even nudge a toe past the line of obedience.

“Every order he gives,” she said, softer still, as if she too were afraid that somehow, Malfoy could hear them. “From the day I started and found out the truth, I wanted to cut her loose and run.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. His throat had suddenly gone tight. He looked down.

“No,” she said. “I owe you an apology. I didn’t believe you when you tried telling us the truth at school. I thought you were only jealous, and I laughed at you. I figured opposites attract, and they’d eloped. That they’d kept it secret all that time to avoid judgement, and that he proposed and managed to convince her not to finish school. Those were the most accepted theories in Slytherin at the time. Our parents who’d been involved in the invasion of Hogwarts knew that he’d tried to kidnap her then, but it was forbidden to talk about. At the time, nobody wanted to give it more thought than that, even if we knew he had no good intentions, and that he was capable of taking her.”

“She *hated* him,” Neville said passionately. “She never would have gone willingly if he hadn’t tricked her... I felt like I was going mad, that nobody else could see it or even admit it.”

Parkinson sighed. “I know. If I could go back and take back everything I said... The moment I realized what was really happening here, I was so ashamed. Regret doesn’t begin to cover it, but I can’t quit. My service to them is for life. The best I can do is be a good companion to her and the boy and bring them comfort.”

“Does he know?” he asked bluntly. “Their son. Does he know? Has anyone told him?”

“Lucio knows to an extent,” Pansy replied, her eyes darting around the room, ever vigilant. “But my Lord controls how much he is told. Even my Lady doesn’t want to tell him everything.”

“He has a right to know the full truth,” Neville said.

“He is a *child* still,” Pansy reminded him firmly. “He can’t help the circumstances of his birth. Telling him everything now will change him. He’ll learn the rest when he’s older, when he can process it better.”

Neville nodded slowly, frowning. He still didn’t quite agree, but who was he to say so? He had no power to change things here.

“All these years with Hermione missing—I’ve spent so much time worrying, wondering what hell she was going through.” He cleared his throat. “I always knew she was good. I thought she’d hold out to her last breath. I never saw it ending this way... with her like this.”

“It was a long, slow road there,” Parkinson mumbled, looking away. “She’s had so much anger building inside her all this time. No way to fight back. It was almost inevitable. My Lord used that to his advantage to corrupt her, and it worked. She felt like she’d been abandoned.”

She held up a hand when Neville started to protest.

"I know," she said firmly. 'I know you tried. And she knows that, too. It was all she had to cling to when things were really bad. But after a point, it was causing her more pain to hold on than to let go. The only way to get *some* leverage was to obey him and get her magic back. And it's working.' She paused. "Maybe there's still a chance for her to go back to normal. Maybe she'll remember herself. Or, if failing that—she can at least gain the power to control him."

Neville stared at her intently. She had a troubled expression that he didn't like. Faint lines etched themselves in the space between her brows. Her mouth had bowed into a frown.

"But..." he prompted.

"I think it's too late," Parkinson concluded with a sigh. "I think at this point, she's too far gone. And I doubt that any of us will come out of this alive. Maybe them, but not us."

Neville went cold.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Are you familiar with Horcruxes?" she asked. "Have either of them told you yet, that they each have one?"

He nodded.

"I know it's a shock," she said. "And frankly, I wouldn't be surprised if He's lying and has more than one. But as far as I know, it's one each. So save yourself the trouble and don't ask anyone what the items are—he just won't talk about it to anyone. Not even to me. So if you're still trying to come up with a plan to kill him, lose it. They've already experienced things that should have killed them, but they're no worse for wear. I've seen it with my own eyes. Whatever your idea is, it won't work."

She looked down sharply at her arm, where her mark lay on her wrist. Neville had felt it too—they were being summoned.

"It's time to fetch Lucio," she said. "You can stay here if you like. I'll be back soon."

She gave his arm an awkward pat, and speechless, Neville watched her as she exited the library, her expression carefully constructed again, like the serene plaster mask over the face of a cadaver.

[A WEEK LATER]

Nott was seated in one of the many unoccupied rooms, perfectly still, perfectly silent. He stared at Hermione, waiting for her order, breathing shallowly. His pupils were huge. He was still flushed and his hair askew from how Hermione had gripped it during her feeding. His thigh was still warm from where she had sat on it. On his throat, two punctures slowly healed themselves. The trails of blood that had stained his skin and clothes were still wet and glistening.

"Stay here and don't make a sound," she said to him. "If anyone finds you and asks why you're here, you'll say that you're here to see me and the rest is none of their business. Draco

is busy right now—once you hear him come back I want you to get up and leave, and make sure he sees you. Tell him I've been with you and left you to recuperate. I want you to make sure he notices that I've fed from you."

"Yes, my Lady," he said.

She took his chin in her hand and tilted his face up to meet her eye. He leaned into her touch, entranced.

"Very good."

Martin was putting away his things for the day when Hermione entered the library. He saw her enter and then looked into the space beyond her, checking to see if Lord Malfoy was with her. When he realized she was alone, he smiled at her.

"Good," she said, coming closer. "You're still here. I wanted to catch you before you left."

She had reached him by then.

"I hoped you would," Martin admitted, grinning. "Whenever someone comes in and it isn't you, I'm disappointed."

Hermione reached up and kissed him urgently. He melted into her touch, wrapping his arms around her.

"He's busy," she whispered. "He's with Neville in his study. They're going to the dungeon soon."

Perhaps she should go with Draco and Neville, but she'd decided to be selfish and steal another moment for herself. She was always having to be careful and strike whenever there was a opportunity. There was no point in her seeing Luna currently—Draco had said he would bring her into the manor, having been pleased with Neville's behavior, so she needn't worry that her old friend was in immediate danger. They'd gone to retrieve her, so likely Hermione would see her at dinner that evening, if not in the morning.

They didn't waste time. Hands roamed, tongues tasted, fabric was pulled away to reveal skin.

Hermione was breathless, as close to giddy as she could be. Each encounter with Martin was an escape from her married reality and every day she looked eagerly for a chance to steal a moment with him. When Draco conducted his daily efforts to breed her again, she moaned and clutched at him, feeding into his fantasy, thinking of Martin all the while.

Martin kissed a hot trail from her throat down to her core, his hands tight on her hips. He buried his face there between her thighs, hardly parting from her except to draw air, his lips coated in her arousal.

Just like when she'd been with Harry, it was these moments away from Draco that felt as though they lifted a considerable weight from her rib cage. It felt like she could breathe properly again. Before her affair with Martin had come to fruition, these occasions were so

few and far in between that she'd almost forgotten what it was like to breathe normally. It was almost an entirely new feeling.

In these moments she dared hope for a better future—one where she might live exactly as she pleased, bound to no one but herself and her son. She would use everything in her power to make sure Pansy would be part of that, too... and maybe even Martin might be there with her, if she dared ask.

Martin had her face in his hands, kissing her gently as he thrust into her. Hermione's fingers dug into his back, her legs had wrapped around his hips. She could feel the tension in his muscles. She was unraveling quickly underneath him, and eventually came first. He followed shortly after, panting, biting his lip to keep from groaning too loudly lest someone outside the library hear.

He collapsed atop her carefully, panting. She stroked the back of his neck. He kissed her shoulder, softening inside her. She wanted more but decided to wait, to see how far they could push this time together. He would take some time to recover and then they'd go again.

With Draco, it was instant—he was a prime example of endurance, always raring to go again and again. She was so used to it she forgot, sometimes, that others were not the same.

She had to admit, she'd come to appreciate it quite a lot. It was the most wretched thing, but she couldn't help but compare. If it were him here with her right now, he'd still be thrusting—perhaps he'd have slid his hand down to play with her clit. Maybe he'd drape her over his lap and finger her until she came, or he might press her against some piece of furniture and ravage her with his mouth.

He's warped your mind, the voice said. This is what he wanted. Do not let him win.

Hermione tried to ignore those thoughts. Martin was dozing off a little, the sweat on his forehead drying slowly. Hermione let him. Could feel his pulse slowing down a little. She listened hard for signs of anyone entering the manor, ever aware of the risk they posed lingering here. She could faintly hear Lucio scribbling away at his desk, humming cheerfully to himself. Then there was the sound of Pansy moving about the kitchen

You're still human, she thought, brushing her fingers through his hair. And Draco isn't. It's not fair to compare you to each other. You're nothing like him, and that's why I wanted you.

Pansy went to check in on Lucio, whom she'd left alone to do his assignments in his nursery after his tutors had left. From there she'd gone to perform some maintenance tasks around the manor and had seen Lord Malfoy and Neville in his study. After that, Hermione had asked her to summon Nott and see him into an unoccupied room. Nott had answered the summons immediately and was only too happy to wait for the Lady in the empty room. After *that*, Pansy had then taken a short break to eat lunch alone in the kitchen, gazing out the window in serious thought.

Before long that brief respite was over and she'd decided to take a peep into the nursery to see how Lucio was doing and if he needed any help. Usually Hermione liked to help him too, but seeing as she had a guest, Pansy didn't mind doing it on her own.

Pansy hadn't meant to listen at the door, but the sound of a moan had caught her attention as she'd been walking past and she'd lingered, wondering if she had imagined it. Lord Malfoy and Neville were still out in the dungeon, having gone to get Luna Lovegood—but then again this was the library, and she'd known Martin was still there painting as of a half-hour ago, and that Nott was still alone in the room she'd left him in about an hour ago.

The doors were thick enough to stifle most of what was going on inside, but after years of serving in this manor, her ears had been trained to a higher sensitivity, always on the alert for another catastrophe. She could recognize the sounds of sex very easily, even if she wished she couldn't or tried not to acknowledge it.

She was just about to step away and go back to minding her own business when there was a rustle behind her and she whirled around to find Neville there behind her, watching her curiously.

"Sorry." He grimaced.

"What are you doing here?" she blurted, her heart pounding.

"Lord Malfoy sent me ahead to gather a uniform and prepare Luna's quarters," he said. "He's waiting downstairs. We're to retrieve her from the dungeon and bring her here after."

"Oh. Yes, he told me this morning." Pansy tucked her hair behind her ear. "I'm surprised it's happening so soon."

"I've done his bidding," Neville said with some distaste. "Just to get her out of there."

"Well, I'm glad she doesn't have to stay in the dungeon any longer," Pansy said.

Neville gave a light scoff.

"Well, this isn't much different, is it," he said. He noticed her unusually flustered appearance. "Is something wrong?"

Pansy stepped away from the door.

"Not at all."

"Is she in there?" he asked, motioning to the door. "Lady Hermione? I've barely seen her today."

"Yes," Pansy replied. "And she doesn't want to be disturbed. Let's move on."

They began to set off, but before they'd taken two steps forward there was the sound of a slap on flesh and a loud moan after, and Neville stopped cold in his tracks. It was heavily muffled by the door, but unmistakable.

He looked at Pansy then, realization on his face.

"That fellow's in there, isn't he," he said. "The artist. Martin, was it?"

"It's none of our business," Pansy said, holding his stare, giving him a stern look. "But they need more time. We need to make sure Lord Malfoy stays far away from this room."

He nodded with a jerk of his head and resumed walking, with Pansy leading the way.

“My Lady has explicitly asked me not to mention her involvement with Martin to Lord Malfoy,” she said, looking back to make sure he’d caught up with her. “She says she’ll tell him on her own. You must remember it’s her secret to share and not yours.”

“Of course,” Neville said. “I won’t say a word.”

Relieved, Pansy nodded and kept going. Neville stayed close, just a step or two behind as they headed to prepare Luna’s new quarters.

“Good for her,” she heard him murmur—more to himself than to her, and with her back to him, Pansy smiled.

“You’ve behaved well,” Draco said to Longbottom. They were outside in the glare of the sun set in the center of a bald sky, a cold wind whipping across the landscape. There’d been a flurry of snow that morning, which by noon had melted away. The ground was soft and wet underneath their feet. The manor stood behind them, ever watchful.

His smile grew broad. Neville couldn’t help but stare at his teeth.

“Very well, actually. You’ve surprised me, Longbottom. I thought you had more fight left in you than this.”

Longbottom’s jaw was tightly clenched, but he looked back at his master with a neutral expression

“What other choice do I have, my Lord?”

Draco smiled. “I’ll admit it *is* nice to have more faces around the house. It does my Lady wife good, and strangely my son has taken a liking to you. I suppose there are benefits to having brought you here.”

Neville said nothing for a moment. Draco waited patiently. There was an undercurrent of anxiety and desperation in the air, coming straight from his new servant. Draco could see it in the lines of his form, most specifically his face, that there was something he wanted to say. He was happy to wait for it.

“My Lord,” Neville finally said. “You said we would retrieve her today.”

His jaw was stiff and his tone flat, but his desperation reflected in his eyes.

“I don’t mean to sound impertinent—but why are we outside? When can I see her?”

How worried he must have been this entire time. Draco was glad he had kept Lovegood in the dungeon yet—like a carrot on a string dangling above Longbottom’s head. Draco congratulated himself silently. What results he had achieved in such a short time!

“That’s why we’re here,” he said. “I suppose you’ve earned this, although it’ll do you well to remember not to question me in the future. Now, follow.”

He started walking. Past the garden, past the giant (now empty) birdcage, past a bunch of hedges. Farther and farther from the house until they were on the verge of entering the nearest forest.

As they'd walked, Neville's confusion and dread had mounted. He fully expected Lord Malfoy to lead him to an old grave. One in which Luna rested.

Lord Malfoy had finally stopped. Neville peered back to the manor—he could see it just fine from here but its windows and doors were specks. If someone were to be watching from one of those many windows, could they make him out from here? Could they be able to tell what was happening if Lord Malfoy chose to kill him now?

A flash of movement caught his attention and his head snapped back to see Lord Malfoy hold out his palm, crouch, and touch it flat to the ground.

"Step back," he ordered.

Neville stumbled backward in shock several paces as the ground began to rumble and shift before them, forming a large hole. When the stairs had appeared, Draco turned to him. There was a glint of amusement in his eyes as he took in Neville's unguarded expression.

"Follow me."

He began to descend into the dark, but again held out his hand, an orb of very bright light suddenly materializing to hover above his palm, illuminating the space around.

Carved stone. More stairs. They went on for such a length, disappearing into the shadows after a certain depth. Neville shuddered to see it. A cold draft of air blew outward from down below.

"You're going to kill me," Neville said, the hairs on the back of his neck bristling.

Draco laughed. "No, fool. I wouldn't squander that event in private. You were just talking about your woman. Do you not want to see her after all?"

Neville's heart jumped at the prospect.

"Of course I do, my Lord."

"Then enter and retrieve her, or she stays down here for longer."

It might still be a trick. But one hint of hope was enough—Neville hurried in after Draco, and the darkness swallowed them both.

A/N:

(Apologies if the references to Hermione's parents are confusing. Please refer to chapter 5 of HIS for a refresher. ((TL;DR:They're still under new identities bc Hermione erased their memories before the war started to protect them. Their names are Monica and Wendell Wilkins and by a stroke of fate and luck encountered Draco and Hermione once in France. Monica was pregnant and Draco let Hermione reunite with her mother briefly, lifting the Obliviate and Hermione's disguise in the process so they could recognize each other. Draco offered Hermione the chance to bring them back into her life but Hermione is too ashamed and didn't want to interfere with their lives, thinking it was best for them to move on without her.)

An Obliviate powerful enough to erase a family member from your memory entirely is bound to mess up the rest of your memory, too, even if that was unintentional. Hermione's mother was the only one who met her years ago in France, and Draco temporarily lifted the curse so she could recognize her own daughter, but right now at most she just remembers that she saw Hermione without her disguise. Hermione's original Obliviate is weakening. (I know that the canon doesn't work like this but I don't care lol) They may not have their full memories yet, and they still might not know who she is but they recognize her distantly, and remember their love for her.

28. The Lovers

NEXT UPDATE: APRIL 14TH. Thanks for reading! 3

When they had got to the bottom of the stairs, Lord Malfoy stopped and bid Neville to continue on his own.

The air was definitely colder here. Heavy fog lingered around the floor. It was quite dark still, and he had to squint to see properly.

Neville got to the end of the stairs and looked back at the Dark Lord, who was now nothing but a tall and dark silhouette, looming over him.

"I don't care to see the reunion," the Dark Lord said. "But you've behaved, so as a reward you get fifteen minutes alone before I collect you both and we set off back to the manor."

He gave Neville a sly, sidelong glance.

"Use them at your leisure."

He thinks I'm some repressed beast waiting for a go at its mate. Neville almost scoffed. *I can control myself, unlike you.*

"Initially, I would have given you half that, but you've earned it. I may be allowing her into my home, but you know by now you're to keep separate quarters. I'll not suffer the both of you copulating in my own home. Once you enter my home the rule is: if the both of you must fuck, you'll do it outside on your own time."

"I wouldn't dream of besmirching your home in such a manner, my Lord," Neville said flatly.

Lord Malfoy only smiled. Neville turned and began to head into the dark tunnel, tense and cautious, still half-expecting a curse to hit him straight on his back.

The walk down the length of the tunnel was long. Lord Malfoy had not provided him with a light source, so Neville cast a wandless Lumos. With a wand, the tip would have emitted light that could be focused into a beam or diffused in order to light the environment more evenly. As it was, without his wand the ball of light merely came into existence and hovered over his palm, warming him with its energy.

There were so many cells here—what was Malfoy planning for? How many of them had ever come to use at some point? Or was it just for show? Neville couldn't really fathom him having that much cause to imprison so many people. His most prized captive was in the grandest cell of them all, anyway. He doubted Hermione had ever spent time down here.

Cell after empty cell... The ground was earthy but smooth, crunching softly under his foot. He was shivering a little and picked up his pace, heart racing.

What condition would he find Luna in? Had Malfoy and George lied to him? Would he find her near death? All sorts of images flashed through his mind—he tried shaking them out. Scanned the place from right to left as he moved, searching for any sign of life.

When he had almost reached the end of that ghastly tunnel he found her, already standing and peering at him through the iron bars, having heard him approaching from far off. She was so pale, had always been, but here it gave her an otherworldly effect—she looked quite like a ghost.

Her eyes were wide in shock. Neville stuttered to a stop before her cell, his heart lurching at the sight of her, like an apparition in the dark.

“Nev?” she whispered, her voice breaking with disbelief.

The door unlocked on its own and an unseen force pushed him inside, not giving either of them a chance to rush out before slamming back shut.

The cell, like all the others, was moderately-sized. This was the only one to hold a cot within, however, and the thick blanket and rather limp pillow that lay atop it were more than Neville had expected. There was a small, shallow basin that held murky water on the floor and a round metal tub beside it, only just large enough for a person to sit in. He only gave himself a half second to process all this before his eyes went back to Luna, taking her in desperately. She was staring at him too, still shocked and frozen in place—his eyes met hers and the spell broke.

They rushed at each other, kissed with a sense of urgency that even Lord Malfoy himself might have appreciated, or at least related to. Neville shook from relief and rage; he cupped her face in his hands, holding her tighter than he meant to.

Her pale eyes gleamed in the dim light, full of tears. She felt a little cold to the touch and he could smell that although she was given the luxury of a tub and a wash basin to clean herself in, there was very little soap, but it didn’t matter—she was alive and gripping him as tightly as he held her. The familiar pressure of her body against his had him sagging against the cold stone wall—he would have sunk to the floor if it weren’t for Luna holding him upright.

“Are you alright?” she was asking, burrowing her head into his chest.

Their voices, although hushed, rebounded in the dungeon like whispers of the damned. Neville wondered if Draco, still posted at the only exit, was listening.

“Are *you*?” he asked, straightening and briefly pulling her away and to an arm’s length so he could inspect her further. Nothing appeared to be amiss—her clothes were dirty and torn, but he beheld no blood, no injuries. “Has anyone hurt you?”

She was nodding. “I’m fine, I promise.” She hiccuped through her tears, smiling beautifully. “It’s you, it’s really *you*.”

“It’s me,” he said in his softest voice, kissing her forehead. “Merlin, I’ve missed you so much.”

“Me too,” she whispered. “I’ve driven myself half-mad, wondering how you are.”

Neville nodded, knowing exactly how she felt.

"I thought I would never see you again," he muttered, crushing her to him again. "*Why* did you do it?"

"I had to try one last time." And then— "How did *you* get here?"

Neville hesitated, looked up at the ceiling.

"I set a bomb off in Knockturn Alley."

She went still in his arms with shock, and then pulled back to look him in the eye, paler than before.

"*Why?*"

He pulled her back in tight, burrowed his head into her shoulder, silently seeking forgiveness.

"It's done. We lost."

She trembled in his arms but didn't push away, nor did she let go.

Neville brought his lips to her ear.

"There's no getting out now. We're going to die here, love."

She shook her head.

"You should have forgotten me. I'm as good as dead. You could have moved on."

"No," Neville said adamantly. "I already let Hermione down. I wasn't going to do the same to you."

Her cold hand stroked the back of his neck. "What have they done to you?"

"I'm their servant now." She had realized his robes were different and stared at their finery, a crease between her brows. "I've been bound to them as much as Parkinson has."

"I wish he'd kill us now," Luna said in a low voice. "He's got to make such a spectacle out of everything. We've lost. We know it. But he wants to keep the dance going for his own twisted sake. He wants *entertainment*."

Neville was nodding, concentrating. Luna felt magic tingle along her form and shifted in surprise. She looked down at her hands and found them clean, absent of the dirt and gristle that had built up over her skin and underneath her nails. Even her clothes, grimy and tattered as they'd been, were now clean and mended. Neville's eyes were wet, looking down at her with such love and pain that it wrenched at her heart.

"We've come to bring you into the manor," he said. "You don't have to stay down here any longer."

"What?"

"He said if I behaved, he'd take you out of here," Neville said. "Today's that day."

Her hair was next—in an instant she felt the oils and stink from her scalp lift—her hair untangled itself. She felt instantly better. The washtub Malfoy had provided her might have been a luxury, but the water was replaced only *once* a week, and the bar of soap that appeared

in her cell at the same interval was often too small to ration properly. She'd had to meter out her baths very cautiously.

"This is the most I can do," he continued. "They took my wand. I can only do simpler magic."

She kissed him. "It's enough."

"Do they feed you? Do you get any light? Does anyone come to see you?"

"I get three meals every day. Orbs of light appear after a certain time so I can see," she said, gesturing to the ceiling. "Malfoy likes to remind me he usually doesn't extend these privileges to his captives."

Neville nodded, remembering the one time he'd been a prisoner of Malfoy's.

"Hermione came to see me once," she added quietly. "It wasn't what I expected."

She glanced suspiciously in the direction from which he had come, as if she sensed Draco's presence far off on the other end. "Is he there?"

Neville nodded. "Said we've got fifteen minutes to ourselves before he comes down himself."

"I thought he would have killed me already," she admitted, looking lost. "But now that he has us both, I imagine he'll want to bide his time and gloat... If he's got you bound to him, will he do it to me, too?"

"He will," Neville replied. "He told me himself. It's not so bad, but it's as restrictive as you can imagine. Still, he's been far *nicer* than I thought he'd be. Hasn't even hexed me once."

"Yes," Luna nodded, frowning. "When I was first brought here I expected the worst, but all they did was question me. Malfoy—he looked into my mind. It was awful. But that was the worst of it."

"They have Horcruxes," Neville murmured, glancing nervously toward the far-off exit. "Did you know?"

"Hermione told me," Luna whispered back. "She *killed* herself in front of me, and lived. I couldn't believe it."

"They drink each other's blood," Neville rasped. "They don't care who sees. It's disturbing—they're not human anymore. Lady Hermione says he even found a way to connect their minds so he can talk to her inside her head."

"Gods," Luna whispered, shuddering. "Imagine the things he says. That's vile."

Her hands were on his chest, fiddling with the trim of his robes. Neville reached up, caught her hands. In that motion, his long, draped sleeve fell down to the crook of his elbow, and his new mark was revealed. Luna took his wrist, inspected it. Her expression was grim.

"You'll probably get one, too," he said.

Luna sighed. "Well, I didn't expect to come out of this unscathed."

She pulled free of his arms to rub at her temples.

“George is there, too,” Neville said.

She had crossed her arms now, looking down at the ground.

“I know,” she said in a bitter tone. “He’s the one who’s interrogated me since I was captured.”

She saw Neville’s expression.

“I promise you, I’m fine,” she insisted. “He never touched me.”

It was a beastly thing to even suspect of someone who he had once called a friend. But George kept close company with Lord Malfoy. One could not help but assume the worst.

“When I first saw him, I thought I was dead,” Luna said. “I’d just woken up in here and he was there outside the cell, waiting. He told me what he does now, who he is. I couldn’t believe it. We’d thought he was dead all these years.”

Neville shook his head.

“He’s been a spy all this time. An assassin. Malfoy’s made him go after anyone who opposed him, made them disappear.”

Luna shook her head. She seemed as weary as Neville felt.

“I don’t think anything can surprise me at this point.”

“Don’t jinx yourself,” he said dully, but his mouth was lifted in a strained smile.

They stared at each other, unsure of what to do.

“I’ve missed you,” he whispered, his voice cracking with emotion. “Couldn’t stop thinking of you. Wondering how you were, if I’d see you again.”

She went to him, put her hands on his shoulders. Pressed her forehead to his.

“I love you,” Luna replied. “I was ready to die when he caught me. But I’m glad you’re here.”

“You’re all I’ve got left,” Neville said, wrapping his arms around her. “I couldn’t live with myself if I’d abandoned you.”

She sniffled.

“Time’s up,” came Lord Malfoy’s voice from behind them suddenly, making them whirl around in surprise.

He emerged from the darkness, his eyes gleaming like two dying stars.

Neville had pushed Luna behind him with one arm, the other reflexively shooting out as if it bore a wand ready to defend.

Amused, Lord Malfoy stared at his empty hand.

“I’ll let that pass—old habits, and all.” He looked at Luna. “Ah—my prisoner. How are you finding your accommodations, Lovegood?”

"Comfortable," she said, her voice toneless, betraying nothing. Her eyes were cold.

"I'm glad to hear it, although if you expect to remain in my good graces, you'll remember from this point on to address me with the proper honorifics, considering that you're about to become one of my newest servants."

It was rare to see Luna so hostile. Neville grasped her wrist discreetly, silently urging her not to misbehave. Indeed, Malfoy was watching her as though he expected her to.

A beat passed, and Luna remained still and silent. Lord Malfoy looked at Neville.

"Don't fret, Longbottom. You've seen now how fair I can be: she is alive and unharmed. You've behaved, and so I kept my word."

His words did nothing to appease Neville's uneasiness.

He hadn't expected for Lord Malfoy to bring Luna into the fold so soon. On one hand, it was good that she was out of the dungeon... but for as much relief as it brought him, it only led to more concern.

Now that we're together, he can kill us any time he pleases.

Full of loathing, Neville bowed to him.

"I'm most grateful, my Lord. You're very generous."

"In light of other prisoners I've had in the past, I agree. You weren't this fortunate, long ago. But you hardly remember that, do you?"

The area where Neville's ear had been cut off ached.

"I don't," Neville agreed. "The Order was able to lift the Obliviate in pieces, so only fragments of that time were restored."

"What a pity," Draco said with a smile. "I remember that time fondly. You were the first prisoner I ever took in my own home. It seems we've come full circle."

The door to the cell opened, and he stepped out.

"Time to get going." He eyed Luna. "Has Longbottom told you the happy news?"

Luna's fingers dug deeper into Neville's arm.

"Yes," she said, "...my Lord. I'm very grateful."

Malfoy chuckled.

"Yes, well—it's no fun to kill you separately with hardly any witnesses, is it? I really don't owe either of you anything, but it serves its own purpose to wait a little longer. It would be quite the spectacle to see the demise of the last of Potter's resistance." His eyes glinted, and his tongue came up to feel the edge of one of his sharp teeth. "The end of an era at last."

Neville bristled at the mention of Harry's name. Luna was transfixed with horror, staring at the Dark Lord's teeth.

Lord Malfoy was already leaving, heading back to the entrance. The cell door was still wide open, taunting them though they knew there was no chance for an escape when Draco

blocked the only exit, and they were both without the full capabilities of their magic. His footfalls were loud, echoing all around them.

There was no need for him to make an order for them to follow him. There was nowhere else to go but up. Neville clenched his teeth and looked at Luna—her stare was grim but resolute. Her hand tightened around his, and without a word they followed Lord Malfoy out of the dungeon.

Coming out of the dungeon was a strange experience—almost like a birth in a sense. There was the dizzying darkness and the narrowing tunnel molding around you as you came to the stairs and began the ascent. Neville climbed and climbed until his quadriceps burned with the effort and he felt it would be easier to give up and slide all the way back down than continue upwards. His breathlessness was hard to contain—he fought to breathe efficiently. Likewise, beside him Luna was struggling—her face was red from exertion and she sounded quite out of breath.

Meanwhile, Lord Malfoy continued on, not once appearing out of breath or fatigued in the least. He glanced at them once and saw their struggle, but rather than mock them, he only turned forward again and kept going.

The higher they got, the ground began to rumble again, and then there was light, bright and piercing, as the surface slowly opened for them again. Neville had to hold his arm out to block that fierce glare, to keep it from blinding him to the final steps before him. With the other, he'd held onto Luna with a fierce grip—having spent so long in the dungeon she'd grown unaccustomed to daylight, and had staggered and gasped when it struck them.

When they finally breached the surface, Neville took in a great breath, and then another, and then another. He heard Luna doing the same—she'd instantly turned her face up to the sun, her eyes closed but tight with relief. The exercise had brought healthy flush to her skin. The cold air invigorated him, chilling him inside, clearing his head.

"Why is the dungeon so disconnected from the manor, my Lord?" he found himself asking.

"Everyone expects the dungeons to be connected in some part to the manor," Lord Malfoy replied, surprising Neville. "As someone who's been subject to a number of raids, it makes sense to keep the dungeons wholly separate, doesn't it?"

Neville nodded. He'd never have guessed the location of the dungeon had he been the conductor of a raid here. Unmarked, yet right there for the world to see, the entrance to the dungeon mocked him silently.

"Pansy," the Dark Lord called, and within that same breath she appeared at his side, bowing.

Draco gestured to Luna.

"Take her inside, show her to her quarters, and get her cleaned up. I'll be back shortly to have her take the vow."

"Right away, my Lord."

She stepped forward to Luna, who watched her carefully, and offered her arm.

"Come," Pansy said. "Let's get you situated."

Luna trusted her already, Neville could sense that much. After all, had they not met before at the secret cemetery, where Hermione had begged them not to harm her, that she could be trusted?

It might have helped to remember that sooner. It felt like an age ago, now. But Neville's sense of trust had been worn down to the bone over the years. Trust, in his experience, was hard-won.

He watched with anxiously as Pansy Apparated away with Luna. He might not trust her fully yet, but he remembered the solemn and respectful way she'd conducted his settling into the Malfoy manor. That did set him at ease a bit. He'd been brought here when he was still free. Luna had spent weeks in the dungeon—she would need time to readjust.

But she's alive, he thought, exhaling slowly. *And well. That's all that matters.*

"Walk," the Dark Lord commanded, and began moving ahead, away from the dungeon. Neville peered around—the garden was far off to their right. They were veering farther from the manor now.

It was colder now and Neville was shivering a little despite his heavy cloak. Why were they walking this far out? What more could Malfoy have to show or say to him? How was Luna doing inside the manor? He wanted to go see her.

"You love her," came the Dark Lord's voice. He had stopped at last, turned to look at him.

There was no point in lying or evading the answer. Malfoy clearly already knew, if he'd used her to get him to comply.

"Yes, my Lord. And she loves me."

Another long pause. The Dark Lord was still watching him—or perhaps he was looking beyond him. The slight was ignored. Neville's own gaze was fixed on the distant woods, all dark and mysterious. The sky was growing dark, but he could still see distant birds going from one branch to another. They were so far away however that he couldn't hear them.

"Everything you did that landed you here, you did for her. You would split the earth for her."

"Everything I did," Neville began heavily, "was to stop you. But I always thought of her. Of the life we could have if we didn't always have to live fearing your shadow."

Lord Malfoy clasped his hands behind his back. He nodded, more to himself than to Neville.

"You see, then, what love does to a person. You know the depths of madness it drives you to, to keep her with you always. You would tear the earth apart for her."

Neville nodded numbly.

"It twists you inside out. Warps your mind. Leads you to ruin. An agonizing ecstasy."

"I wouldn't romanticize pain and obsession in that way," Neville said cautiously. 'With all respect, my *Lord*, your words imply you were a better person before you fell in love with your wife,' he added through grit teeth. "We both know the truth."

The Dark Lord didn't seem to mind the impertinence. His full lips tilted upward at one corner.

"Regardless, we understand each other. Look what destruction we've both wrought for our wretched love."

Neville pictured Luna's horrified gaze after he'd told her what he'd done. He closed his eyes.

"Maybe we aren't so different, you and I," the Dark Lord continued. He began to circle Neville, his bright, cold gaze trained on him.

"You're much more resilient than I gave you credit for. You've lasted this long, after all. Willing to put other's lives at risk to get what you want. Look at what you did to Danielle. Look at what you did in Knockturn alley. Let's not forget all those thieves and criminals you took it on yourself to punish. Potter wouldn't have had the balls to do it, though he had potential. I saw that rage in him. I pushed him. Should have pushed further. Maybe he would have surprised me, but it's far too late for that."

He tipped his head to the side, assessing Neville coolly.

"What more have you done, that I don't know about?"

Neville was frowning, watching the Dark Lord warily. He chose not to respond, but the guilt of his own memories was a mountain atop his shoulders.

Nonplussed, the Dark Lord resumed pacing.

"You know, my wife resisted me for all these years. Annoying though it was, I still admire her for that. She has an infinite reserve of strength I could never break. Every time I thought I'd finally done it, she proved me wrong. Since I couldn't break it, I corrupted it instead. I wish I'd done that from the start—it's worked marvelously. You've seen how she flourishes now."

"I—I don't understand," Neville said, only partially lying, because if Malfoy was suggesting what Neville thought he was getting at, then the world must have flipped upside down while they'd been down in the dungeon.

"I could use a man like you on my side," Lord Malfoy said, finally coming to a stop in front of him, his fine robes swirling around his legs. The gold trim on them flashed brilliantly in the natural light. "I suppose it would be a shame to cut down such potential. You would for once be on the right side. I could offer you riches, a new home, a good position in my court. You would serve me in a more dignified manner than you do now. I would even let Lovegood live, too, if you were to accept."

Neville's mouth had run dry. The world seemed to have frozen around them; he stared at Lord Malfoy in dumb shock.

"You think you can bribe me with power."

“I think you’re a smart man, despite recent decisions,” Malfoy replied archly. “I think you are still young, with a whole life ahead of you. You have a woman you love. You could start a family, if you wished. You might earn the favor of your Lord eventually, perhaps even his trust, as George has. And you would stay connected to your old friend, who would be glad to see you live.”

Neville felt ill. Anger thickened his tongue as he pondered his response. Automatically, his mouth opened and he felt a vicious ‘no’ crawl its way towards his mouth but he held it back with some effort.

He owed it to Luna to share the news, so they could discuss their options. The reply died in his throat like a withering flower.

Am I really going to consider agreeing to this?

The conflict in Longbottom’s eyes was a sight to behold. Draco had seen that same look many times over in his own wife’s expression. A sight he never would tire of seeing.

“I don’t expect an immediate answer,” Malfoy said, holding up his palm to give Longbottom some relief, as it looked as though his tongue was about to start tying itself up in knots.

“I want you to think on it. Discuss it with Lovegood when we get back inside. I’ll give you some time, but remember: I’ll ask for your decision only once.”

Neville bowed.

“I understand, my Lord.”

Lord Malfoy stared down at him, satisfied.

“Get back inside,” he ordered. “I think I’ll stay out here a moment longer. You’ll discuss this topic with your woman tomorrow, after she’s been settled. Now go, and have Pansy send word once it’s time for the Vow.”

Neville Apparated away at once, leaving the Dark Lord alone.

Draco took in a deep breath, his eyes closed, concentrating on feeling his lungs expand and then retract as he breathed out. The vapor left his mouth in a long stream, fading away in a mere moment.

His heart beat steadily, a little faster than its normal rate—no grand surprise, considering the excitement of the day.

If only Hermione were here to share in his delight... she’d been busy at Lucio’s side, the last he’d heard. A pity—he would have liked to press her up against a tree and expend some energy right there. He would fill her up, have her gasping and moaning in the heart of their garden, the unkempt rosebushes threatening to swallow her whole.

There was always plenty of time for that later. There was important work to be done now. He couldn’t let himself be distracted by his rampant lust.

The proposal to Longbottom had been... unexpected. An impulse. He honestly hadn’t considered issuing anything of the sort at the start of the day. And yet...

He'd spoken truthfully. There was no need for tricks and deception at this point.

Draco ran his tongue along the sharp edges of his teeth thoughtfully.

I turned Weasley. I turned my wife. I can turn him, too.

He's not that far off from doing it himself, honestly.

Lovegood was of less interest to him. She had worked alongside Longbottom all this time, to be sure, but he was less familiar with her, had no such long history as he had with the others. They'd gone to the same school and been in the same year, and he'd laughed at and made fun of her countless times, but their acquaintance had never extended beyond that. In fact, he didn't think they'd ever exchanged more than a few sentences to each other. She was an oddity but he'd never held any true quarrel with her, other than her being the partner of his adversary.

There would be time to assess her character later, he decided. She was less of a prize than Longbottom, but clearly an asset still, for she'd been the token that had lured Longbottom to them at last, and if he hadn't included her in his offer of clemency then he doubted that Longbottom would even consider it.

I'll turn her too, for the hell of it, he thought, smiling. *Unless Longbottom will beat me to it.*

It was a sad marvel that no member from their small band of resistors had even tried to come for them. Not that the manor could be found easily, but there hadn't been so much as a peep anywhere. Like they'd all burrowed back into the earth like worms once their fearless leaders had gotten themselves snared in his web.

Some rebellions die with a cry, and others with a whimper.

By now there were perhaps too many servants in the house. Pansy was so efficient he'd traded off their only House Elf some time ago, knowing Hermione's thoughts on the matter. The addition of Longbottom was welcome but not entirely necessary, and now here was Lovegood to join the staff. Even Lucio didn't require such care.

He supposed his problem would be solved once he killed them. But if they accepted his offer, what then? Would he promote them instantly? No, he decided. They would have to work for it a little harder to really earn his trust. If Hermione came to be with child again, then the extra hands would be welcome, after all.

And if they refuse me, they die. As simple as that.

What a wonderful few months it had been already. Victory after victory, all lined up one after the other.

I'll continue hoping the next one grows in my wife's belly, he thought, his gaze straying back to the manor.

He thought back to the night he'd made a ruin of Azkaban, how powerful he'd felt then. How he'd gone home and made love to Hermione and they'd conceived Lucio that very night.

What a different picture time painted. Then, she had been miserable and unwilling, bearing his touch with a clenched jaw and cold, distant eyes. These days it was quite the opposite, and it still made him a little lightheaded and drunk with desire when she reciprocated, or even made advances toward him.

Why, just the other night she'd been riding him, perched in his lap and bouncing on his cock, her hands digging into his shoulders, her soft, generous breasts rubbing against his chest. It was all he could do not to melt into the bed—her eyes had been closed to concentrate on keeping the rhythm but they'd opened suddenly and he'd been so struck by the look of helpless surrender and bliss in her expression that he'd wrapped his arms around her tightly, ceasing her movements, and came inside her so hard and so thoroughly he'd seen stars. And to his delight, she'd cried out and came instantly after, convulsing in his hold, her cunt milking him greedily.

He felt his groin stirring already, had to break that thought, calm himself back down again—no easy task. That same rush of power and victory filled him now. They would try again tonight. He thought back to his store of fertility potions. They were likely all expired by now as he'd made them years ago. He would have to get some more as soon as possible. There were too many claims on his time lately to brew them himself. He would write to Erik at once.

"My Lord," came Pansy's voice behind him.

He'd heard her arrive. Draco turned.

"She is ready."

Martin was recovering in the library—Hermione had had to leave him there, pry him with some charms and a PepperUp potion so that Draco wouldn't see the aftermath. He'd quickly cleaned the couch they'd been on after they'd righted their clothes, opened a window to get the smell of sex and blood out of the air. Hermione had sent for some light refreshments to be brought to the library so he could recover more quickly.

Hermione still felt warmed within from his blood. She had been careful to only take a small amount; a few deep gulps, spreading her tongue over the wound afterward to take in any errant trickles. Martin, to his credit, had winced and grunted slightly at feeling his throat penetrated by her teeth but had made no complaints, his hands grasping her waist tightly. Hermione had had half a mind to take more but resisted, afraid that at some point the habit would overpower her.

Feeding from Nott was equally pleasurable—she liked to grind on his thigh until she came, feeling his whimpers of need through his throat. Nott loved her breasts, loved to bury his face in them and suck on her nipples as he fucked her. Hermione liked to reward him for his service after she drained him, let him nestle in her arms and feed from her in his own manner. By that point he was usually glaze-eyed, thoroughly spent and reduced to nothing but movement and little words except:

'Thank you, my Lady.'

Martin, however, she liked to have him inside her when she fed from him. Draco liked to do that, too. Liked to drink deep from her with his cock still buried in her, throbbing and pulsing with every swallow.

“I have to go,” she murmured, kissing him along the throat, leading up to his mouth. Her fingertips traced over the puncture marks she’d left on his flesh, healing them. “How do you feel?”

“Much better,” he assured her. “Don’t worry about me.”

She only looked at him, a slight frown on her face. He kissed the back of her hand and she took her leave, venturing outside and into the woods again to expend more energy.

You’re still human, she thought, guarding that thought, holding it tightly to herself. It was cold and misty outside—the humidity tangled up her hair. *Of course I’m going to worry—about you, and Lucio, and Pansy. You don’t have the protections that were forced on me in order to keep me alive.*

What other way was there to ensure their longevity other than creating Horcruxes for them? Lucio was out of the absolutely out of the question. The thought sickened her deeply—she knew she’d never be able to bring herself to do it, to sink them all to her level just for some peace of mind. First of all, she still didn’t know *how* it was done, and then there was the fact that there was no chance she’d be able to pull off the process three times without Draco noticing.

I have to act quickly, she thought. *The sooner this ends, the better. I can’t trust that Draco won’t commit some other atrocity at random. He strikes whenever he pleases.*

Already, her nerves were tingling, her body grew hot with the approach of transformation.

She was prepared for the cold, dressed in a thick and warm long-sleeved gown and a heavy cloak thrown over on top. She’d slipped out of the manor quickly, gleefully, once she’d made sure that Draco and Neville were still not back inside, and Lucio and Pansy were still away. She figured it wouldn’t be long until they were back—all the more reason to leave now. She didn’t feel up to answering questions about how she’d spent her day.

Hermione cast a charm to bunch the length of her skirt in a knot at calf-length, so she didn’t stumble. Draco did not prefer her to be so covered up. She figured she would get a little torn up and messy before coming home. He would see her and want to undress her, perhaps pull her into the bathtub with him. She would kiss him all over, ask him how the visit to the dungeons had gone.

Anything to distract him from what I was doing.

She would have to be alert and take any means necessary. Pleasure him all night if she had to. It didn’t matter.

Martin was probably about to begin preparing to go home for the day. She hoped he’d be gone by the time Draco and Neville went back inside. If one looked underneath his long-sleeved shirt, they would find the marks Hermione’s mouth had left all over, veering perilously close to his groin. He, in turn, had left her tingling and reddened all over, too.

And when she’d fed from him—

Desire swept through her in another dizzying haze. Hermione revisited the memory of her teeth sinking into his flesh, snagging on his artery. The pleased groan he'd given, surprising her, as she'd expected a cry of pain. The spurting of hot blood into her mouth, staining her lips and tongue as it went.

Blood had no particular taste to it—it was not sweet, nor was it bitter. Somewhere in between. But it was always hot, and thick. And when there was that strong undercurrent of desire and pleasure coursing in him, it lent itself into his blood. She'd consumed happily, entranced by the experience, and he'd laid there underneath her and held her to him, throbbing inside her, allowing her to take to her heart's content.

She'd been so careful not to hurt him, not to take too much. Had taken enough to sample him (and perhaps a little extra), and then extracted herself.

He'd been slightly dazed afterward, but she helped clear that away by moving her mouth to a different part of him.

Birds sang in the distance as if they were beckoning to her. Hermione closed her eyes and focused. Wind danced through the intricate framework of branches all around her. Hermione felt the cool earth beneath her feet, her own heart pumping rapidly with anticipation.

When she opened her eyes again she was smaller, much smaller than before, and feathers had taken up all over her body again and she could not speak but chirp, and a hard beak had taken up where her mouth had been. She was in the grass, heart racing, once again trying not to panic at the sudden shift, how the world seemed so much larger now than it had before. Her legs carried her a short distance as she tried to steady herself, and her arms when stretched out were now wide, glossy black wings.

The wind was a new experience. Like seeing through a new set of eyes. Hermione looked around, trying to make sense of this new world. An exclamation pushed past her lips, but instead of a human voice there came a series of lovely notes, although they were high-pitched from alarm.

She was a bird who did not know how to fly. There was nobody to ask for help, no book in their library to consult. She was not even sure that any real bird she tried communicating with would understand her, and she likely would not understand them.

Not yet.

She stretched out her wings again, and the feel of the wind on them was like a burst of joy. They caught, and she found herself propelled backwards for a short distance until she managed to close them again, and she dropped safely back onto the earth.

But she would learn, no matter how long it took. She was determined to be prepared.

Draco had Apparated back inside with Pansy, who'd gone ahead to Lovegood's quarters. Draco had lingered, suddenly annoyed.

"Nott came to visit Lady Hermione, my Lord," she had casually said. "I believe he's still here."

Well, he certainly hadn't left yet. Draco saw him exiting the hall and coming toward him, a deep flush on his face, a rather stupid smile on his face.

"My Lord," Nott said, taking a knee at Draco's feet.

"Nott. I wasn't aware you came to call," Draco said coldly.

"My Lady summoned me in a rush," Nott said, looking a little sheepish. "She mentioned she didn't want to trouble you or anyone else."

Draco spied the puncture marks of his wife's teeth in Nott's throat. A heady spike of jealousy gripped him. Before he could stop himself, he found himself slipping into Nott's mind, saw the glorious view the unworthy man had been blessed with earlier, of these alien hands on her body, her tits in his mouth. He could feel by proxy through the memory, Nott's ecstasy as she'd used him for her own pleasure earlier that day.

He pulled out sharply, his eyes turning red, a snarl threatening to lift his lip. Nott hadn't noticed the invasion at all.

Behave, Draco told himself. *You made a promise. Break it, and it'll set you back.*

He forced his face into a calm mask, when all he wanted to do was impale Nott's throat with a dagger and pin him to the wall, let him bleed out there. He would twist his cock off and burn it for having the audacity to know his wife.

At the same time, lust drove his jealousy in the other direction. He pictured himself fucking Hermione, his hands guiding her hips, while Nott was busy with his own cock in her mouth. The image sent a sharp shiver of desire through him.

BEHAVE.

He cleared his throat, struggling to tamp down that mental image.

"I hope for your sake you leave her satisfied every time," he said.

"Of course, my Lord," Nott said in a hushed voice. "She uses me to suit her own needs, although I do my part as best as you can."

Draco nodded. Wondered where she was now.

"I trust you're following my rules," he said at last, his voice low and menacing. "And that you'll inform me if *she* is the one who ever breaks any."

"To the letter, my Lord," Nott said. "She takes care of the mandatory spells every time. We would not dream to disobey."

That satisfied Draco a little. An idea had just come to him-it lifted his mood back up to where it had been previously. He nodded again, gave Nott one last cool glance before he set off up the stairs.

"Very well," he said. "You can see yourself out."

Nott rose and inclined his head as Draco swept past him, not sparing another glance. He straightened his robes-Lady Hermione's scent still lingered all over him. He took care to

breathe it in deep-and he left the manor, feeling the air decompress from around him as he landed in his own home, smiling at his own luck.

Back inside the manor, cooped up in his own quarters, Neville waited anxiously for the first opportunity to see Luna. She was with Pansy still and he didn't know if she had yet taken the Vow, as nobody had told him. Nor had he seen anyone else since reentering the manor. Except for the boy. He had gone to check on him and found him napping by one window, a pile of drawings at his feet. Not wanting to disturb or waken him, Neville had closed the door silently and left.

Not even Lady Hermione seemed to be around which was rare but for now all Neville could think about was Luna. Was she with Malfoy now, watching his crest and mark of servitude take shape underneath her skin?

Malfoy's proposal weighed heavy on his mind.

The sheer arrogance of it made his blood boil. His heart pounded furiously in his chest, narrowing his field of vision as he stood alone in his room. The chest at the foot of his bed contained his few sets of clothes-his only possessions. Malfoy had taken his wand. Neville had reconciled himself to the fact he would never see or hold it again.

'I'll only ask once,' Malfoy had told him.

He already knew he must take the offered hand. Dying was not an option. Not now.

Luna would agree, he was sure. If the Dark Lord made good on his promise, then they would be cared for and comfortable for years to come. He supposed if they joined forces with him and eventually gained his trust then he might allow them more freedoms... enough to live on their own away from this hell. They'd discussed starting their own family once, wistfully, knowing it could never happen. Was it possible? Dare he hope?

He felt the mark on his wrist flash with heat briefly.

It was time. He Apparated at once, letting the summons transport him to where the call had originated.

He landed in an unfamiliar bedroom.

The first person he saw was Luna. Then Pansy, standing beside her.

Luna was pale and withdrawn, already dressed in the black and gold robes that identified the Dark Lord's crowd.

The three of them bore them now. The robes may have been fine and lightweight, but they were no better than chains. He felt a sharp twinge of nostalgia for the days when uniformed robes meant something else entirely.

"Are you alright?" he asked Luna.

She nodded solemnly, tried to smile to reassure him but her lips couldn't quite bend the way she wanted them to.

“Stay calm,” Pansy warned them softly. “And everything will go smoothly. Don’t anger Him, and don’t fall to his insults. He feeds off of it.”

Luna must have slipped and cast her an affronted look, because she spoke sharply in return.

“This is for both your sake,” she said. “You’ve both done well. Don’t throw it all away now.”

Neville bit his tongue and nodded, focused on letting his anger ebb away. Luna came over to him, took his hand.

“I have to summon Him now,” Pansy said softly, watching the both of them. “Let’s pray this goes quickly.”

She raised her finger to her wrist and pressed down on her mark.

An instant later, Lord Malfoy appeared—his sudden presence seemed to suck the air from the room.

He looked at them expectantly.

“Look at you,” he said, the corner of his lip curving upward. “Waiting so patiently. Well—Lovegood, step forth.”

Luna obeyed stoically, staring right into his eye without flinching—an impressive feat, considering his eyes had turned bright red.

Neville fought against every instinct that urged him to rush forward and put himself between the two. It was the strangest sense to feel his magic curbed inside him, blocking him from using its full potential—otherwise he would have hurled curse after curse to distract Malfoy and give him enough time to snatch Luna and Apparate away. If he tried that now, his casts would produce nothing, and he would likely fall dead to the ground before he could reach Luna.

The only thing he could do was watch with rising dread as Malfoy approached the woman he loved with that disgusting red stare, his hand held out for hers.

“Give me your hand, Lovegood,” he ordered.

There she seemed to hesitate for a fraction of a second, as if she too had weighed her chances for a last attempt at freedom, but had also realized the futility of it. She looked at Neville briefly, her eyes urgent and soft.

He recognized that look. They had exchanged it silently before the major battles that had shaped this timeline.

I love you.

The Dark Lord took her hesitant hand, and began the incantation.

That evening at dinner, the newest member of the Malfoy manor staff was present in addition to Neville and Pansy. They waited silently along one wall as was custom, ready in

case anyone had need of them.

Neville would have held Luna's hand if he could, but sensed it would anger Malfoy. Pansy was cool and collected, always rushing forward first if Lord Malfoy needed something to spare the both of them.

Lucio had looked curiously at Luna and asked about her. Luna had watched the boy carefully as he spoke to his father, who merely smiled cryptically and said that they simply would be needing more help around the house from now on, and squeezed his wife's thigh under the table.

The dinner went by peacefully. Luna took it all in with concerned eyes—this was the first time she'd been openly exposed to the interactions between Draco and Hermione. Neville had been the one with the greatest insight between them all this time, and she'd always had the information secondhand. To see it from this close was another thing entirely, and it was really upsetting to have to stand there and not be able to help in a way that truly mattered.

She had caught Hermione's eye as she'd entered the room—Hermione had given her an embarrassed, tight smile.

But now she sat there with her shoulders stiff and her plate half empty and Malfoy's hand was in her lap. Lucio couldn't see it from where he sat but she, Neville, and Pansy could.

None of them said anything. Malfoy was speaking to his son but she couldn't pay attention, watching with growing distaste as Malfoy's hand went to Hermione's hip and squeezed hard enough to make her shift in her seat. Luna expected her to be cross and to swat that offending hand away, but instead Hermione turned to him and gave him a look that the three servants couldn't see, but it must have been good because the Dark Lord smiled wickedly and removed his hand.

When dinner was over, Lucio left his seat and obediently bid his parents good night. Pansy took Lucio's hand and began to lead him to the nursery. She cast one last look at Neville and Pansy, her eyes serious, silently reminding them to behave.

"Will you read me a story?" they the boy ask just before the door swung shut.

Lord Malfoy was standing behind Hermione's chair now, his hands gripping the elegant frame.

"Shall we, my Lady?" he asked, bending to sniff at her hair.

Hermione pushed her seat back, rising. There was a smile on her face.

"You're always in such a rush," she chided him. "I want to greet our newest servant."

Luna felt her pulse speed up.

"By all means," Malfoy said, and he took her hand and led her to Neville and Luna.

Malfoy's gaze was locked onto Neville's, assessing him boldly.

Neville only just remembered to bow at their approach, and taking her cue from him, Luna followed suit.

"Welcome," Hermione said when they had straightened again. She was looking at Luna.

Luna could still feel the violence of that green flash that should have taken Hermione's life. She'd seen it tear right through her, forcing her to stagger.

Yet here she stood before her.

It was hard to think of anything else.

"I'm glad to see you out of the dungeon," Hermione said.

"I'm very thankful to be out," Luna said.

"I trust you'll adapt quickly to your new role here, Lovegood," Malfoy added. "I'm sure you'll find life is a lot more peaceful when you're not fighting against me."

Luna wished she could hex him. But her wand was long gone.

"I—I'll try my best, my Lord," she managed to say.

"I'm sure my Hermione would appreciate having another female presence around here, too," Malfoy continued. "For the time being."

Ah. There was the first reminder.

"Pansy and I would be glad to have company," Hermione said, sounding earnest.

Luna attempted to smile. The ball of dread in the pit of her stomach turned uneasily. How many more reminders would he issue, that the balance of their lives were dependent on him?

Malfoy flicked his gaze to Neville, silently relaying a message.

Your situation can change, it seemed to say, if you accept and join me.

Neville kept his face still and his eyes guarded.

"Well," Malfoy finally said. "You're both dismissed for the night. I'm sure you have a lot to discuss. Come morning, Longbottom will meet with me in my study and Luna, you'll attend to my son with Pansy."

They bowed.

"Yes, my Lord."

"Good. Come now, sweetling," Lord Malfoy said to Hermione, taking her arm and leading her away. "You're *mine* for the rest of the night."

Hermione moaned, shuddering as Draco nuzzled along her throat. His hands were caught in her hair, pulling to create tension but not enough to hurt, and his cock stretched her from within, hot and pulsing, as familiar as ever. He had just pushed in, going slow, making sure she felt every inch and ridge that went inside of her until he'd fit himself completely inside, feeling her walls tight around him, fluttering a little, trying to adjust to his girth and length. She was so wet he'd sank inside her as naturally as breathing, groaning with pleasure.

Exquisite. Each time was a marvel. He fit inside her perfectly, and she was strong enough to take him. He knew he wanted it rough that night-but first came her pleasure. He would

make sure his wife was satisfied before he got his way, and that he would fling Nott further from her mind with every stroke and every gush of come.

But he stayed still, breathing shakily, absorbing the feel of their joining. Frustrated, Hermione held his face in her hands and pulled him down to kiss him. Her mouth opened to his demand and his tongue invaded, their breaths mixing. He moaned aloud.

“Draco,” she panted, breaking the kiss, arching her back to offer herself to him, to show him her surrender.

He kissed her clavicle, pleased.

“Yes, firebird?”

“Fuck me,” she said, clutching at his ass, pushing her hips upward to try and relieve her agony. She squeezed him slowly with her cunt to coax him to move—but his entire length was already lodged inside her so there was no more to take and he refused to move. If he dared push deeper, he would hit her cervix, and *that* usually pulled her right out of the mood from the pain. Draco grit his teeth and tried to ground himself.

Not that her attempts weren’t affecting him—he was trembling a little with the effort to stay still. His pupils were dilated and beads of sweat dotted along his hairline. Now and then he let out a grunt or and his cock would twitch inside her but he still would not thrust.

Hermione tightened her hold on his hips, pressing him as close to her as she could, gasping at the waves of pleasure that filled her with the sensation. She squeezed him again, her thoughts so addled with lust that she could hardly form words. The need was all that mattered. Draco bit his lip and buried his head into her shoulder, shaking now.

“*Hermione.*” He panted. “You devil woman, *wait.*”

He reached down and touched her tenderly—she was swollen with need, and so wet his fingertips easily glided along her flesh. She whined softly, arching again into his touch but Draco kept it feather-light, skimming the area around her clitoris.

“Just a little longer,” he said, his voice hoarse. She was squeezing him again, trying to finish him off. That wouldn’t do. Draco swore under his breath, pulled out of her by an inch. She was so exquisite—after all these years and he would still never tire of her, of the intricacies of her body, or how he felt inside of it. He throbbed again inside her and his balls ached, feeling heavy and desperate to fill her up.

Again she tried to continue on her own, pushing her hips up to reclaim that inch he’d taken, and then she pushed down to the mattress, sighing in relief as she felt his length slide out of her a few more inches.

Draco pinned her hips down with one hand before she could thrust again.

“You’ve made me wait long enough,” she protested, scowling.

He tilted his head, scorching her with his gaze. “My, my. So hungry for cock, aren’t you, sweetling?”

The pad of his finger touched on her engorged clit and she gasped, her eyes starry and desperate as he rubbed at her slowly.

“There’s no need to rush,” he continued, his tone soothing. “You’ll have had plenty of it by morning, you know that. You’ll be cock-drunk and a quivering, whimpering mess by the time you slip out of my hands. I’ll leave you dripping all over the bed and your delicious little cunt all red and sore. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

He was still teasing her clit—Hermione had gone scarlet.

“Yes,” she gasped.

Hermione had had enough. She reached up to hold his face in her hands.

“Breed me,” she ordered, watching his pupils dilate further until they almost overtook his irises. She felt his breath hitch. “I can’t wait any longer, Draco. Do it now or I’ll find someone else to do it.”

His eyes flashed.

“You would, would you?” he asked, and gave her one thrust, sharp enough to make her gasp again and her head press into her pillow.

“I would, if I find your performance lacking,” she said, recovering fast, raising a brow at him. She tapped her talons on his hips—a silent threat.

Draco grinned, pulling back. Her walls clung to him.

“I don’t think there’s any doubt of that,” he said, pushing in slowly.

“Then prove it,” Hermione said with a challenging smile, “and pray you don’t disappoint me.”

The following morning dawned cold and bleak—Draco rose from the bed and went to the nearest window, pulled the curtains back. It had snowed overnight, and a vast expanse of white stretched toward the horizon, peppered by black patches of snow-covered pines.

He heard Hermione stir on the bed and turned to face her—her eyes were open, a little bleary, but alert.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” he said gently.

Hermione looked past him and out the window.

“Do you think we’ll have a girl this time?” she asked, not looking at him. “If I’m able to conceive still?”

Her hands were on her stomach, spread flat. She was still covered by the sheets, her long hair in a pool around her pillow, her complexion rosy but her expression somber.

“I know you want another son,” she added. “I know you probably want *only* sons. Would a girl be truly such a disappointment?”

Draco frowned.

“If we have a girl, would you treat her the same way you treated me?” she asked, finally meeting his eyes. “Will you restrict her every move? Keep her under lock and key, unable to

live her life?"

"If we're so lucky to have a girl," Draco began carefully, "I'll do my best to raise her fairly, my Lady. She'll be free to live as she wishes, as appropriate to her age and status."

Hermione merely stared at him, trying to gauge whether he was lying or not.

"You have a habit of controlling the women in your life," she pointed out. "It makes me fear how you would raise your own daughter."

"I'll do better," he said, and meant it. "I promise, Hermione. You are my wife. I wouldn't dream of treating our daughter the same way I treated you."

She wanted so badly to believe him.

I sought to control you the way I did— he began,

—Do, Hermione interjected. You still do, Draco. Even if to a lesser extent.

I do it because I knew we had to be together, he said. And you had to be protected at any cost, Hermione. I knew it made you hate me. I knew it eroded any potential trust between us. I didn't care. I didn't know how much time we would have together, and I was willing to do anything to buy even ten seconds more with you. I know I was wrong. I still don't regret it, because I see what we are now, and what we have, and I don't feel sorry.

But now we have forever, he continued. And if that's as long as it takes to get that doubt to clear from your eyes, I'll try my hardest, my love.

Her eyes were wary.

"Do you really mean that?" she asked quietly.

"Yes," he said at once. "I'm willing to take another Vow, if it pleases you."

She sat up in bed slowly and he went to her, kneeling beside the bed where she sat facing the stained glass window, her legs hanging off the side of the mattress.

Draco cupped the backs of her calves in his hands and looked up at her.

"You're willing to change?" she asked.

"You have every right to doubt me," he said, pressing fervent kisses to her knees, her thighs. "But I swear to you, firebird: I meant what I said."

She took his chin and made him look at her. His icy grey eyes were bright, boring into her. The devotion in his gaze had always unsettled her, until she had learned it was hers to exploit. His hands were tight around her ankles now, his hands strong and hot and his chest pressing against her knees.

Hermione felt something shift inside her, something strange and unidentifiable. Her thumb traced along his bottom lip. Draco's lips parted, and his tongue peeked out to taste her skin.

Part of her wanted to rebuke him—why decide *now* that he wanted to change? Simply because he finally thought he had everything he wanted? Because he thought she was finally willingly his? Funny how men treated women just as they liked until a daughter, or other such

female relation came into the equation, and suddenly they saw their own idiocy under fresh eyes.

People don't change, she wanted to say to him. *Not easily. Not quickly.*

Forever, he'd said. The thought scared her. For all his claims of devotion and wanting to change, she couldn't afford to forget that he was still a cruel, crazed man in every sense. She only needed to remind herself to what lengths and deception he'd resorted to in order to ensure themselves that forever.

Could she really take him at his word and tread willingly into eternity with him at her side?

The thought choked her.

He could see the conflict in her face. Draco took her hand now and kissed it, pressed it against his cheek.

"If we have a girl," he said, "you will take the lead in raising her. I'll defer to your judgement at every turn."

"I will name her," Hermione said firmly.

"Something tells me you have ideas already." His tone was teasing.

"Beatrice," Hermione said at once.

He pondered it for a moment, clearly surprised—it wasn't what he had expected.

"It's lovely," he said after a moment. "When did you get the idea?"

"Yesterday, when I went to see my parents," Hermione said. "After hearing what they went through, I wanted to do something more for them."

"What do you mean?"

"I had a sister," Hermione said, pulling her hand from his face. "When we last saw her, my mother was pregnant. Didn't you remember?"

"I didn't," he said after a pause. "Sweetheart, my involvement in their lives ends at the annual deposit of sums into their account. I thought you didn't want me involved any further than that—Had I remembered, I wouldn't have thought to check up on the birth. And you made it clear to me you didn't want to meddle in their lives either up until now."

"I wasn't accusing you of anything, Draco," Hermione said. "I was only asking... because I'd forgotten, too. We live in different worlds, us and them. I guess I put it in the back of my mind because it was too painful. But she carried the baby to term, and lost her in a matter of days after the birth."

Draco stood to sit on the bed beside her, holding her to him. Hermione sniffed.

"That's tragic," he said. "I'm sorry it happened to them."

"They named her Beatrice," Hermione said, her voice muffled by his arms. "I never got to meet her... I thought that if I stayed away it would spare us all the pain but now they've lost *both* their daughters. They've suffered that loss twice now—how is that fair?"

"It isn't," Draco said. He stroked her cheek. "But your gesture is sweet—I'm sure they would be pleased."

He paused again, thinking.

"Does this mean you want to undo the Obliviate, after all?"

"Not yet," Hermione said, pulling back to give him a pleading look. "Soon, but not yet."

He kissed the top of her head.

"I'm glad to hear you've changed your mind," he said. "You're lucky they're both still alive. I want you to reconnect with them, enjoy what time you have left together. Lucio deserves to know his grandparents."

"I suppose I'd have to introduce you to them," Hermione muttered.

He went still. "Is that what you want?"

She thought for a moment.

"I don't know."

"It's your decision, sweetheart," he said. "Whatever your choice is, I won't fight you."

They were in Luna's room, on the bed together, holding each other so tightly perhaps even Lord Malfoy would have had difficulty prying them apart. In an hour, the sun would begin to rise. Neville had to remember to stay awake, to steal back into his room before Pansy awoke.

He'd come with the intention to discuss the offer Lord Malfoy had presented him, but on seeing Luna in her bed, couldn't bring himself to. She was so relieved to not be in the dungeon anymore that she'd taken to her quarters instantly, happy for the soft, large bed and the thick blankets. Her relief spread to him and he'd decided not to tarnish that relief with stress over their decision for that night.

It had been a long time since they'd had sex. Neville's body had responded to her proximity in the bed right away, and she'd been more than willing to go, until he'd told her Malfoy's rule for their... relations. That had put her off it for the night entirely, rattled and disgusted that Malfoy had even thought to put forth such a rule. Neville had calmed himself down easily, and they'd settled for holding each other and sharing what the other had missed since her capture.

"How many died?" Luna was asking softly, brushing his hair away from his eyes.

Neville's eyes were pained. "I never heard the final count. But it was a lot. I planned it that way."

Luna's eyes were wet with tears.

"Could you ever forgive me?" he asked hoarsely.

"I... I don't think that's up to me," Luna replied. "But I can say I understand why you did it."

He nodded. Had expected that answer.

She still didn't know about the reason for Danielle's capture. Would he ever find the courage to tell her? Something told him she would not be as kind with her sympathy.

'We're not so different,' the Dark Lord had told him. Neville had balked to hear it.

But he was right.

He'd destroyed a section of Knockturn alley and taken a number of lives for Luna. He'd betrayed one of his closest allies in the rebellion, fed her to the wolves to save Luna.

If Harry was alive... he'd have been ashamed of him. Would've turned his back on him long ago. Neville didn't like to think about that, but it was true. He'd joined Harry and his cause to defeat Malfoy, and had ended up a villain in his own manner.

This is what it's come to, he thought bleakly. *I've got more in common with a monster than the hero.*

29. Not One Lie

Frowning, Draco tossed the book he'd been reading from carelessly back atop his desk. It lay in an awkward position, open and hinging off the edge of his desk, gravity flipping its pages slowly and then all at once so that it shifted its weight to the side. It slid further and further off the desk. The spine was now bent and damaged—he heard the creak of the binding breaking and didn't care.

The book had been of no use. None of them had, so far.

He ran a hand through his hair as he stood from his seat, peeling his gaze away from the pile of books on his desk, forcing himself to think of anything outside his own frustration.

It didn't work. He heard the book fall heavily onto the floor at last.

He'd never been a patient man, try as he might.

Hermione was still not pregnant. And he had come no further in his idea with the portrait.

There was no one he could think to ask about his theory, and every book he'd looked into only discussed the process of animating paintings but held nothing about them containing physical, *tangible* spaces within.

But magic made most things possible.

There has to be a way.

His dungeon sat cold and empty, but it was no place for a lady, for his wife. No matter how angry he became with her, he'd never seriously considered putting her in them. It was why he'd outfitted each of their homes with as many luxuries as he could conjure, so that she could see the home as anything other than what the place as a whole was: another cage.

Hermione was too clever for that, of course, seeing through that façade from the very beginning. Not even the splendid libraries, or the spacious greenhouses, nor the lavish music rooms he'd had built for her could fade the longing in her eyes when he caught her looking out a window, trying to peer beyond the horizon. Nothing he could conjure or purchase for her could distract her from her pain—a truth he often ignored.

Is an enchanted painting any different from a cage?

Not likely. One could travel between paintings, but there were precious few at Malfoy manor... come to think of it, before Martin's portraits, he'd hardly decorated his various homes with art of any type. He frowned. It had never really felt like a priority, truth be told.

The poor thing. No wonder she had been so desperately sad and bored these past years. He'd foolishly thought a library was enough to entertain her. Well, now she would have art in spades. He would find paintings and sculptures worthy enough to grace a palace, worthy enough to be on display in his home.

Martin could be relied upon to create some additional artwork, Draco was sure. But that would not be for some time. Martin was human, after all—he couldn't paint any faster than he already was. Draco would have to be very careful in his choices of what scenes he would have depicted in oils—there would be no other males in any paintings he might bring home... at least, not any sort of male that might tempt his wife. It was bad enough that he was jealous of Nott, but he would *not* be jealous of a bloody painting. Either way—it would serve both to decorate the place further, and to give her more breathing room if his plan worked.

I trust I won't need them in the end. It's a precaution, that's all. Without the ring, I needed a backup plan. She might be suspicious, but even her clever little head won't be able to guess at my intent.

The prospect of his new scheme elevated his mood a little. At the same time, he entertained a tiny bit of doubt, thinking of Hermione, what her reaction would be if he ever managed to bring his plan to fruition.

'*don't you trust me?*' she'd asked him not too long ago, that alluring smile lighting up her eyes, bewitching him.

A tricky path... was it really worth it? He didn't like to doubt himself, but the truth was that she'd behaved so very well of late. There were many happy periods in Draco's past, but this had to be at the very top. He'd hoped for a time like this from the start of their marriage, had known it was always in his grasp. One where she'd given in to his love at last, and possibly even reciprocated.

Now look at you, firebird. The Dark Lady that's been missing all this time, at my side; her rightful place.

Now that it had happened, however, he couldn't ignore the shrewd thought in the back of his mind that warned him that she was only faking.

And if she's playing you to find a way out again? It asked him.

If she was, then he had to commend her, because she was doing such a beautiful job of it that he'd fallen to his knees to her in one fell swoop. Nor did he have any complaints—the woman had a grip on his heart that he rejoiced over rather than resented, as he'd done so long ago.

But you'll always be a wild, furious creature, he thought affectionately, picturing her in his mind, her talons poised to strike, her eyes blazing red. *Just like me.*

And that was why he needed to take precaution. Just in case. Now that the ring was no longer a viable option. He missed it dearly, sometimes. It had made everything so much easier.

If he just modified the spells and undid some of them, she would agree to wear it again, and then there would be no need to bother with this painting nonsense that seemed more and more like an impossibility.

...But now that she'd made him take the Vow and promise not to restrict her magic again, it wouldn't do. He would have to go back and carefully undo every single curse that he'd woven into that ring before he set it back on her finger.

A slight hindrance, yes—but if she held the cleansed ring she would feel the difference, and her trust in him would continue to grow.

Perhaps, he thought, his thoughts flying further and further ahead, I'll propose to her again. We'll have a true wedding ceremony then, the one she's always deserved.

They would have an audience this time... there would be actual vows exchanged. It would not be entirely one-sided... Lucio would carry the rings. Draco would lift that black veil off his wife and kiss her before the world. And it was high time for a crowning ceremony, too...

We'll let the world see, he thought. Let them witness the glory and might they face if they dare challenge us.

The thought seemed more appealing by the second. He might be delusional in some aspects, but this time he felt there was a healthy chance that she would accept without coercion or hesitation. It excited him terribly.

Then the ring had to be tended to at once if he was to propose. He made a mental note to commence the undoing of the enchantments as soon as possible. The faster he set about to all these tasks, the better.

"You can't control everything, Draco," Hermione had said to him recently, having sensed his impatience. Her hand had been on his shoulder, kneading the stiff muscle underneath. "Let it be. If it's meant to happen, then it will."

Draco had no tolerance for that line of thinking.

Why was fate always hailed as this concrete power? It deserved less praise than it got.

Fate was what pushed her into my path when we were young, he thought, staring out his window. And it was fate that gave me the ring. But I did the rest. I chased her. I bound her to me. The spells on that ring didn't appear on their own. I did it all.

He had not written to Erik yet about the fertility aid potions. Draco sat back down swiftly, penned a quick message, and tapped it with a finger, watching the missive fold itself, hover into the air, and then vanish. They took a few days to brew. Hopefully, they would be ready for use by the end of the week—and he might as well take advantage of Erik's presence to have him conduct a quick check-up on Hermione.

This time, he would make sure Hermione knew she was taking the potion. He would keep his word and not deceive her again.

She wants the pregnancy this time, he thought, feeling his mood lift, thinking of how eagerly she behaved in their daily breeding sessions. She'll take it without fighting me. And we'll be one step closer. Perhaps she's disappointed too, that it hasn't happened yet, and doesn't show it for my sake.

Well, it would happen sooner or later. He wanted sooner—always did, but she was right. He couldn't control everything. All he could do was feed her the potion and hope for the best.

Hermione had just left Pansy and Lucio in the nursery to take a walk about the manor when Draco's voice cut across her thoughts.

My love.

She halted, stopping just before an open window.

Yes, Draco?

I've finally looked over the replies from the invitations you wrote, he said. I've picked a few families to arrange a meeting with their children and Lucio later this week.

Did you choose anyone we know?

No. Our generation hasn't been very successful with maintaining the population, to put it one way. There's scant choices there, and well—those families aren't ones I'd want associating with my son or with us on a more personal level.

War tends to have that effect on a population, Hermione replied flatly. Especially seeing as you killed so many during your reign of terror.

I never said I was innocent, sweetling. Still, I believe I've picked out suitable candidates. But first we'll have to see how Lucio takes to them.

That was the part she worried about. Lucio got on well enough with the Muggle children down in the nearest village. But how would he fare with magical children coming from Draco's followers?

I trust your judgment, my Lord, she replied. Although I dare say it took you long enough.

He chuckled.

Well, we've been busy, haven't we? He asked. Quite a lot's happened these past weeks. Nevertheless, Lucio will be delighted and that's all that matters.

Of course, Hermione said. Will that be all, Draco?

For now, he said. She could hear his smile. Unless you would like to come keep me company in my office.

Time apart makes our time together sweeter, don't you think, darling? She asked in a teasing tone.

Outwardly, her expression was cold and blank as she stared out the window at the gloomy sky.

My wife is so wise, he sighed. She heard the flip of a page, felt the channel of communication begin to draw closed. Have it your way, then.

The morning crawled on into the afternoon. Lucio finished with his lessons and was escorted down to sit for Martin with Pansy and Luna chaperoning. Neville was stuck with Draco. And George was still off somewhere. Hermione wondered what he did when he wasn't at the manor or on a mission—did he have a partner somewhere he visited in secret?

Did he ever go back to the Burrow? Where had he lived before Draco made him take up residence in the manor? It was none of her business, but Hermione couldn't help herself. George had become an enigma-even more so than when his twin had been alive and the two had always been plotting.

With everyone else in the house occupied and distracted, Hermione slipped outdoors once more, donning her heavy cloak and treading deeper and deeper into the woods. Each time she went a little further in, choosing a place at random to stop and exercise her abilities. To return to one place too often was too risky, and she wanted no eyes on her as she practiced. She never stayed for longer than a couple hours so as to not warrant anyone coming out after her.

Her attempts at flying in her transformed form had garnered success in these last few sessions. She'd learned how to angle her wings and let the wind catch in her feathers, how to maneuver her body to allow herself to glide from side to side and to land without crashing. It was exhilarating-she'd never liked flying on broomsticks but this was entirely different, and though she was still very much afraid she had to reason with herself that she *could not* stop now.

Draco didn't want her to learn how to Apparate. He'd dangled that promise over her head, a contract formed out of spider's silk.

No matter. She was learning to travel anyway-just not in the way he expected. It may not be as expedient as Apparition, but it was still something. And she had done it all on her own, with nobody's help.

As angry as he'd get, I think he'd be extremely proud of my cunning, Hermione thought to herself with a smile, looking down at her arms as she shifted slowly back into her human form, admiring the brilliant black plumage there.

She'd told herself she wouldn't give in to his stupid pet name and choose the form of a bird. But this was not her giving in-it was a means to an end. By now she'd accepted the fact that she would take any means necessary to get what she wanted. Sure, she could have accepted his paltry promise of one day teaching her Apparition, but she was tired of waiting-she'd given him enough.

Each area was left in utter ruin when she left it-magic could do only so much to revive it, and she tried her best, but ultimately there was still obvious signs of ruin. She'd been training on honing her rage, on wielding it like a whip, letting her power slice through thick groupings of trees and other brush, trying to direct what direction it went in rather than let it fly loose and out of control. It took a great deal of effort and concentration, but it was more manageable by the day and she'd become quite satisfied with her work.

It was an excellent way to release pent up frustration and energy, aside from the obvious method which Draco preferred. She would look on her work before leaving and feel a rush of pride and anticipation.

That day's coming, she kept promising herself, carving into the trunk of a felled tree with one talon easily. *I'll have my revenge.*

Gorge yourself on it, precious one, the twisted voice purred to her affectionately. *Take everything you want and more. You may never have another chance. Make him regret the day he laid eyes on you.*

Martin found that painting progress was coming faster than before. It was a pleasant feeling, to have exerted one's skill so continuously that what had taken up much time before now came naturally and without much trouble. Pansy had just let him in to the manor and he'd set up quickly, preparing his palette with the ritualistic reverence a priest might adopt when preparing the holy communion.

By now he had primed the canvas, given it a wash of color for the under layer, blocked in the background and then the boy standing by the window. He had roughed out the features on the face, the general shape of form and clothing. The detail would come later, when he had the values sorted. He had mapped out colors and worked out the perspective for the background—he could see the finished piece in his mind's eye, clear as anything before him now.

The sketches he'd already made of young Lucio sat beside him on a tall and square-shaped rolling table. He hadn't much need of them at this point—by now all three faces of the Malfoy family were permanently engraved in his mind, as much as his own. If he lost his sight one day and had to feel a line-up of faces he would be able to recognize each of them at once due to how carefully he'd studied their features to make these portraits.

Lord Malfoy was sharp and chiseled, from his brow bone protrusion to the elegant angle of his nose and the sharp curve of the bow in his lips to the strength in his jaw, the long line of his throat.

Lady Malfoy was much softer in comparison—a gentler angle to her forehead and a slightly-upturned, pointed nose. Her full lips with their delicate bow, her cheekbones high, her jawline a graceful slope. There were two frown lines at the start of each brow, nigh invisible, but faintly etched there. He had never noticed them until the first time they'd kissed. He'd never been so close to her up until that point, and had been struck and honored by the privilege of her intimacy. By now, it was a recurring thing—one he was most grateful for.

It had also given him the opportunity to notice the scars Lord Malfoy had left on her. He had known of the delicate *M* carved into her arm, having seen it before, but when he had seen the extent of the bite mark scar left on her shoulder, he'd been horrified.

The others had been discovered gradually. They were smaller and not as prominent, but lingered on her flesh regardless. She'd made no effort to hide them from him, looking down at the scars with resignation in her eyes, watching him carefully to note his reaction.

You deserve to be painted without them, he'd told her. *Without his marks*.

She had smiled, her eyes wet.

Then there was the boy.

Still in the throes of childhood, his face was round and exuberant. His nose and eyes were very much like his father's. He had his coloring, too, all pale and eyes like ice. Martin could see him grown up, impossibly handsome like his father, but without the malice and cruelty.

A beautiful family. Martin felt positively plain beside them—not that it mattered. He was not here for his looks. Yet he could not help but wonder why Hermione wanted him so.

Don't go down that path, he reminded himself. It's just as she said—there can be no room for feelings here.

He would merely thank his stars for her attentions and complete his commission, because she was right. No good would come of him staying here longer than he should.

Still, Martin found himself deliberately slowing his pace at the canvas.

Once this one's finished, there'll only be two more left, and then you can put this place behind you, he tried to reassure himself. You can continue living without looking over your shoulder constantly again.

That was a seductive thought. The manor was not a happy place, nor was it very welcoming. But the thought of leaving and never seeing it or its inhabitants again filled him with an unexpected sadness he didn't know how to explain, and it was for that reason that he continued to work at a slower pace than before.

[LATER THAT DAY]

Hermione entered just as the sky was halfway through its descent toward the horizon. By then, Lucio had been relieved of his sitting session for the portrait a few hours before. Martin had bowed and Lucio had cheerfully said he would see him the next day and then skipped off with Pansy, who'd promised to fix him a small snack.

He'd continued painting.

Waiting.

There'd been no sign of Lady Malfoy up until then. He had not dared ask Pansy, too worried of making his feelings obvious. If she sensed his nerves she never let on, but her calmness helped him. If she was not worried then it meant Hermione was alright, that nothing had happened to her. He wondered what she might be doing, if she was with the Dark Lord. Thoughts of what the two of them did in their private moments kept lingering in his mind.

The moment he saw her come into the library he stopped and put his brush and palette down. She was alone, and the door closed behind her without a sound.

"He's speaking with Neville and George," she said—it was their habit to always know where Lord Malfoy was before indulging themselves. Much easier when he was gone entirely from the manor, but those occasions weren't frequent enough—they had to steal what time they could.

Martin knew she was also seeing that other man—Theodore Nott, was it? Martin was sure he'd seen him a few times at the events he'd attended here at the Manor, but they had never spoken. He *did* know that Nott came to visit on a semi regular basis, and he knew full well what Hermione did with him.

There was no room for jealousy here. She was free to do as she wished as the Lady of the house, and he was merely a tradesman they had paid for his services. He was a commoner to them. There was room for nothing else between them. There never *could* be, and he dared not allow himself to entertain such fantasies of something more between them.

Once she had told him that she only used Nott to make Lord Malfoy jealous, that she didn't truly care for him.

But that had led him to wonder why she didn't use *him* to make the Dark Lord jealous. Would that not be more effective? Was there a specific reason she didn't want Lord Malfoy to know of their affair?

The thought, despite his attempts to ignore it, formed a tiny seed of insecurity within him that had planted itself deep and sprouted into something tiny and green.

She didn't want to be seen with him, that much was clear. She'd bound him to secrecy, had gently asked him not to mention it to anyone (although he knew full well she could have spelled him into obedience without needing to ask). She always came to him in secret when she was sure she could get away with it—and yet, with Nott, if he came calling in the middle of the day off she went to see him, making sure her husband knew.

Only Pansy had seen them together. He wondered what she thought of it. She was a vault of information, forbidden to gossip about her masters. Plus, by now he was aware how loyal she was to Hermione. He doubted she would stay silent if she was apprehensive about the match, despite the differences in their status. They played their roles when the Dark Lord was around, but when he was gone Hermione behaved differently sometimes, as though they were equals, and close friends at that.

Still—there was always so much transpiring in this place under the surface. One never truly knew what was happening. Martin had been working here for months now, and could not claim to understand it all.

That strange insecurity was unwelcome. He tried to refute it whenever it came up, but it wasn't easy.

She doesn't belong to me, and she definitely doesn't owe me anything. She has her reasons for the secrecy. You're a fool to let yourself grow this attached to someone who could never be yours. Even Nott can't claim her.

She came up to him now, pushed him into the nearest bookcase, kissed him hungrily, her hands balling into fists on his chest. He always secretly wished they could go somewhere far away from this manor and find someplace private to spend their stolen time. The smell of his paints and the library always lingered in his memories of their couplings. He wanted to know what she smelled like without those elements tarnishing the memory. But she was on him now, her body lush and warm, molding itself to him, and every thought was wiped from his mind—he held her tight, his hands digging into her lower back.

Her tongue swiped along his lower lip, her breath hot and searing into him, wiping all thought from his mind. Martin buckled under her touch, let her fire consume him, completely at her mercy.

[THAT NIGHT]

Shocked, Luna looked at Neville.

"Why did you wait so long to tell me?" she asked.

Neville shook his head. "I don't know. I'm sorry. I guess I was trying to wrap my head around it. I didn't know what to think."

Luna's hand pressed over her stomach. She felt dizzy all of a sudden.

"So you're telling me that he's willing to exonerate us if we join him," she said. "Is that right?"

"He said we'll have an elevated position in his court," Neville added numbly, nodding. "We won't have to worry about money, or being in danger again."

"As long as we work for him."

"We already do."

"Not by *choice*," Luna said. "If we join him for good, that's something else entirely."

"It's the only choice we have," Neville said, a pleading tint to his voice.

Luna's brows knit together. In the privacy of her quarters, they were free to speak as they wished (without breaking their Vows), but still unable to shake their paranoia from living within Malfoy walls, they still kept their voices low no matter what.

"You're considering it?" she asked, dismayed.

"Is that so vile?" he asked honestly. He sat on the foot of her bed, looking so worn and beat down that she understood at once.

She said nothing for a moment, her mind racing.

"If we say yes," he began, "we could take back our lives. Here, he could kill us whenever he wants, Luna. Are you saying that after all these years you're alright with dying at his hand just like that?"

"Yes," Luna said without hesitation, "If it means we get to keep our dignity. Everyone else has submitted to him. I don't think I could live with myself if I took that final step."

She looked down at her arm where Malfoy's mark rested proudly under her skin.

"This means nothing," she said, thrusting her arm out to Neville. "If I'd had a choice in the dungeon, I'd have died before he could put it on me."

"We could have that future we always talked about," Neville said, meeting her eyes. "The one we thought would never happen. We'd have a home. Power... We could start a family if we wanted."

"All at the cost of serving him," Luna insisted. "It would all be tainted by that. And deal or not, he'd still be in control of our lives. I know what you're thinking, Neville, but we still wouldn't be truly free."

"Freedom doesn't exist anymore," Neville said heatedly. "And you know that as well as I do. Not that he's in power the way he is. There's no winning. So we can either give up and die or play the game and see what we can get out of it. Hermione's doing it. We can, too."

"But don't you see what it's *costing* her?" Luna whispered, dropping her voice so low Neville had to lean in to hear her. "She's stronger than us. I don't think I could put myself

through something like that. Living a lie day after day.”

“We all have to pay a price,” was Neville’s flat answer. “She’s been unlucky enough that she’s had to pay more than any of us.”

Luna shook her head, rubbed at her temples.

“When does he want our answer by.”

“He said he’ll give us time to think it over. But he’ll only ask once.”

“Gods,” Luna breathed. She sat down beside Neville.

“We’ve had so much of our lives, time that we could have been happy together, fighting someone else’s cause,” Neville said. “We’ve sacrificed so much of our time and energy to win this fight, and we still lost. I know it makes me selfish-but I want that time back. I want that future with you. I want a family. I want the luxury of time to only focus on you and me.”

Luna blinked back tears. Deep down, she agreed. That future had always been written in smoke, she knew. Considering how deeply they’d been involved in the war, they’d known their lives might be cut short at any moment.

We never should have let ourselves fantasize so much about a happy ending, she thought. It hurts all the more when you realize the world owes you nothing.

[A FEW DAYS LATER.]

It was snowing lightly outside the following morning. Draco was the first to wake, and pulled Hermione to him, nuzzling along her throat before rising to prepare for the day. Hermione held out for a moment longer, not wanting to leave the warmth of the bed, but in the end dragged herself out of it and also began to dress. They hardly spoke, but Hermione could sense Draco’s good mood. She, in turn, was cautiously optimistic. Draco pulled her in for a kiss before they left the room together to go to the dining hall.

“Erik is coming later today to give you an evaluation,” he said to her. He pressed another kiss onto her lips. “To make sure you’re healthy.”

“If you think it best,” Hermione said, her arms wrapped around his waist. “Will these visits become more regular, then, if we’re trying for another baby?”

“Yes.” Draco traced a knuckle over her cheek. “Don’t be nervous, sweetling. If any problems arise, we’ll deal with them together.”

Hermione tilted her head, watching him.

“And you’ll go through an evaluation of your own, too.”

It wasn’t a suggestion but a demand.

“Of course,” he said, squeezing her lightly. “I want to make sure everything is as it should be.”

Pleased, she smiled at him. His gaze was intent and hungry, swallowing that small crumb of affection like a cruel, greedy god looking over a fresh sacrifice.

"In time," she said—rather cryptically, he thought. "I'm yours, Draco. There's no need to rush when we have forever."

He cocked his head, silently inquiring, but she looked away and let him tighten his hold on her even more so that she was crushed deliciously against him.

"Do you feel it, sweetheart?" he asked in a murmur, burying his face into her hair. "How happy I am? Tell me you feel the same."

She wanted to lie. Her crafted response was already on her tongue. But she couldn't deny that there was feeling behind them... a truth she didn't like to acknowledge that seemed to be growing stronger of late.

"I am," she finally admitted, blushing. And then added—

"I didn't know it could be like this."

Draco sighed in a sharp gust. She felt a tremor run through him.

"I told you," he said gently, "from the beginning. I knew. I always did. And now it's here. Darling firebird..."

He pressed a kiss to her throat.

"I love you more each day," he said hoarsely. "I didn't think I could any more than I already do."

Hermione smiled, her eyes a little cool though he couldn't see them.

Honest as her words had been, there was still an undercurrent of resentment and hatred underneath them, bitter as a cold wind.

All the apologies and the gestures of love you make will never make up fully for what you did to me, she thought, guarding that thought inside herself. I don't care how different things are now. You'll still atone for your sins. I'll make sure of it.

It wasn't until two hours after breakfast that Healer Erik finally arrived. Hermione had been in the library with Martin and Lucio when Pansy entered with the news of their visitor.

She met Erik in the bedroom, and he conducted the evaluation smoothly. Hermione watched with interest as he held his wand over her lower body and cast spell after spell, informing her of what each one did as he went. His healer's bag was full of a supply of glass bottles, some filled with powders and others held potions within.

"These spells are not totally accurate, I must warn you, my Lady," Erik said. "Magic does have some limits. If there are any serious problems I would have to suggest a visit to St. Mungo's."

Hermione nodded.

“However,” he said, lowering his wand and backing away, “my tests so far conclude you’re perfectly healthy. There are no issues to be found at present—you should have no trouble conceiving.”

Hermione sighed. She hadn’t known what to expect. Had almost *hoped* that the Horcrux had damaged her in some way to make what he had just confirmed impossible. But if the spells were not completely accurate... maybe there was still a shred of hope.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice a little flat. “I’m happy to hear it.”

“My Lord requested that I bring a supply of fertility potions with me,” he said, gesturing to a thickly wrapped bundle he’d left on the bed.

Hermione looked at it, fighting to keep the disgust she felt inside from showing on her face.

“He usually makes them himself,” she pointed out.

“Of course, my Lady,” Erik said, “I’m sure that’s true. He expressed to me he’s too busy these days to take up potion-making again, which is why he had me brew a new batch.”

This did nothing to quell Hermione’s suspicion. But that was fine—she knew what was occupying his time as of now. That made her feel a little safer, that she knew what his next step was.

So I can make my own plan.

Her period wasn’t due for another week—she had to track it more closely now than ever.

“I must go report to Lord Malfoy,” Erik said, bowing. “Unless you had any questions, my Lady?”

Hermione bit her lip.

“So there was no damage from the Horcrux?” she asked.

“That I can’t say,” Erik said thoughtfully. “We would need to conduct more thorough testing than what I can do here and now. Even then, I’m not sure that I could guarantee an answer. I’m not sure what to look for. My tests revealed nothing unusual, but there may be something the Horcrux may have affected in you.”

His tone lowered.

“If your husband had allowed me to study you while you were in the magic-induced coma, I might have learned so much. We might have a lot more information than we do now.”

Hermione nodded. If only Draco had put his grief and possessiveness aside for a mere moment to bring himself to say yes...

“If you wish, we may arrange for some studies to be done in St. Mungo’s.”

“No,” Hermione said, conflicted.

I don’t have the time to spare for that, even if I want to know. There are bigger things to worry about.

“Well,” she finally said. “I’m sure I can count on your assistance should anything come up.”

Erik bowed again. “It is always an honor to serve yourself and your husband, my Lady,” he said. “I’m glad to see you’re well. Please don’t hesitate to summon me again if you have more inquiries.”

When he was gone, Hermione paced around the room.

Erik had taken the fertility potions with him, so there was nothing she could do now—but even if she’d wanted to tamper with them, what could she have done? Replace them with water? The viscosity and the color wouldn’t match anymore, then. Draco would know at once.

They were having sex daily, as usual. Draco always came inside her, usually several times in one session. She had no way to protect herself from it. He’d stopped issuing the contraceptive spell after each session, and had stopped adding it to her food. She knew if she asked to begin taking it again, he would refuse and remind her of her promise. Would manipulate her to always get his way.

If she asked Erik for a contraceptive, would he obey? Potions would be out of the question—they would be found. And he could not come over every single day before or after every time she and Draco had sex—it would be too obvious.

If I did it myself, or had Pansy do it, would he notice? The idea suddenly struck her. But that was another minefield. The spell had to be cast immediately before or after sex. How could she get around casting it without Draco noticing it? She didn’t even *know* the spell.

She had to find Pansy at once.

She came across George in the corridor after Erik had left the room.

He looked well. More relaxed than usual, which was strange, but she said nothing.

“I haven’t seen you in a while,” she said, smiling a little, her hands clasped together at her front. “How are you?”

“Well, my Lady.” George bowed. “When I am not needed by my Lord, I’m free to do as I wish. I prefer to spend this time outside the manor.”

“I don’t blame you,” Hermione said, prompting him to smile. “I suppose you’ve been informed of what’s taken place in your absence.”

“Yes,” George said, nodding. “I’ve just arrived, but Pansy told me.”

“Have you spoken to her?”

George made a strange face.

“I doubt she would want to see me,” he said.

Hermione frowned. “What do you mean?”

"I was the one who interrogated her under the Dark Lord's orders," he said. "There was no torture, but it was still unpleasant. I followed the commands I was given."

"She seems no worse for wear," Hermione said carefully, and then paused. "Not that I've observed her enough to tell a true difference."

"I bring pain to everyone who sees me in one way or another," George said. "It can't be helped."

Hermione was frowning, but wasn't sure what to say to that.

"How are you, my Lady?"

His eyes were normal. Good. Draco was not watching.

"I don't know," she admitted, cupping her elbows. "There's so much happening lately. I always have to be so careful. It'll drive me mad."

"Long walks outside always help," George said, "when I feel I'm in a bind. I'd be honored to escort you on one now, if you would accept."

He bent his arm at the elbow, offered it to her.

"I'd like that," Hermione said, meaning it, taking his arm. Wordlessly, she cast a charm to summon her thickest cloak and it materialized over her shoulders, clasping at her throat and chest and draping itself down protectively over her form. George had done the same, and when they were prepared, she'd squeezed his arm and he'd Apparated them outside.

They were just beyond the garden now. Hermione looked up at the sky. That day's *Prophet* had said there would be heavy snowfall that evening. She looked forward to it.

"Where shall we go, my Lady?" George asked.

"Let me lead," Hermione said, and still arm in arm, she led him toward the surrounding forest.

The day was cold but there thankfully was no wind blowing. Each breath that came out from her mouth became an instant dry vapor, and the snow was crisp and crunched under their every step.

"Pansy tells me you're fond of walking," George remarked. "I've looked out my window a few times to see you outside."

"Movement helps clear my mind," Hermione said. "I'm sure you can relate. Do you ever fly anymore?"

"If I must," George replied. "I try to avoid it altogether. Reminds me too much of..."

"Oh," she said. "I'm sorry."

“Don’t be,” George said. “It’s all in the past. When I fly I think of him, but to clear my mind I choose running or walking.”

“I’ve never seen you doing either around here,” Hermione said, not accusing but merely curious.

“No,” George said. “I go to other places for that. My Lord doesn’t mind.”

There was a lapse in the conversation. They kept walking in silence. A tree had partially collapsed, blocking their path. George made to turn to avoid it, but Hermine led him straight to it.

“I’ll remove it,” he said, lifting his arm.

“Allow me,” Hermione said, her hand already outstretched.

There was an enormous creaking sound as the dead tree lifted into the air, its hanging, broken branches scraping the forest floor. There was a giant scattering of falling leaves and twigs breaking off.

George watched, impressed.

Hermione flicked her hand to the side casually, and as if it weighed nothing, the trunk and all its debris was flung to the left, crashing into the trunk of two other trees which groaned and swayed, but did not fall or even break at its impact. The sound was ear-splitting, but she didn’t so much as flinch.

“Let’s keep going,” Hermione said, now offering her arm to him.

“Are you still certain about your wish?” Hermione asked suddenly.

George didn’t hesitate to answer.

“Yes.”

“And there’s nothing I can do to convince you to change your mind?”

He squeezed her arm lightly from where it was tucked into his, silently thanking her for the gesture.

“That’s right.”

They were getting nearer and nearer. The trees were sparser here, the forest not quite so thick and green. It had been apparent in degrees, at first, but the closer they came to the location, the more obvious it grew.

The sparseness was not of natural occurrence. Destruction had been wrought here. A manmade clearing opened up suddenly before them, and all the trees and plants that had once occupied this space had been struck by a force so strong that it had been decimated almost entirely. Stumps and straggled roots remained. Rocks and heavy boulders, other dead tree trunks had been thrown over by the impact.

George observed it all with a critical eye.

On first glance, one might have immediately thought that a meteor might have landed here to create such a scene. But there was no sign of impact, no crater in the ground, no otherworldly rock peeking from deep in the ground.

A second assumption might have been that a large wild animal or even a group of them, had done this. But there were none native to the area that George knew of that could have caused such a scene.

A third assumption would be that humans had done this. A stray camper, perhaps, or a wild hunting party of some sort. But there was always some sort of human litter left behind in these cases. George could see no sign of that, of anyone having stayed here or stored food. No fresh holes dug into the ground. Something seemed off about the place as a whole.

He was aware that Lady Hermione was watching him as he made his observations. Something was dawning on him.

All the debris was projected in one direction—from where they were standing now. Whatever—whoever had done this, had to have stood from this very point.

Even the most destructive spells he knew couldn't cause this level of damage. Somebody must have stood here and cast curses over and over to get this aftermath. Or, if they were powerful enough—only once, with very great energy.

Lady Hermione saw that he had figured it out. She was smiling but it didn't quite reach her eyes—she seemed to be pleading a little within those depths.

"Are you sure there's nothing I can do?" she asked again.

He wasn't sure how to answer. Wasn't entirely sure what she was trying to convey.

Aside from the fact that she possessed much greater power than he had anticipated.

"I keep your secret," she said, "and I hope you can keep mine."

He nodded. The Dark Lord hadn't looked into his mind unprompted in many years. The only times he *did* was when George had a detail from a specific memory while out on a mission that he felt he must see.

"Of course," he said.

"There may be a way," Hermione whispered, despite the fact by now they were a few miles from the manor. "He won't see it coming. I can try to get you out, too."

George stared at the wreckage for some moments, his thoughts flying far ahead into that open space.

Hermione pressed on his arm.

"George."

He came to, his expression unchanged.

She stared at him with guarded hope in her eyes.

"I appreciate your offer," he said. Leaned forward to kiss her cheek. "I really do. But this doesn't change what I want."

She sighed. Nodded, as if she'd expected this answer despite her efforts.

George looked back at the clearing.

"You've always scared me a little, you know," he said.

Hermione frowned. He looked back at her, a small smile on his lips.

"Dumbledore's Army," he clarified. "You knocked everyone on their arse every meeting. It was great fun getting to be your partner sometimes, even if I walked away with bruises."

Hermione smiled. Her eyes were wet.

Back in the manor, George bowed.

"Thank you for allowing me to spend time with you, my Lady," he said.

"Thank you for offering," Hermione replied. "I enjoyed it very much."

He left, heading in the direction of his quarters.

Hermione shrugged off her cloak, teleporting it back to the bedroom. She took a moment to herself to use the bathroom and to put the cloak away, not wanting Draco to find it and pepper her with questions about where she'd gone.

She'd been walking towards the nursery when Draco came into view suddenly, making her stop short.

"There you are, my love," he said, holding his hand out for her to take it and stand with him. "I was just looking for you. Lucio's playmates will be arriving soon."

Hermione blinked, having forgotten.

"How soon?" she asked.

He was looking her over.

"You have time to change into something more formal," he said. "The parents will be staying for tea so we can assess them properly."

Hermione bit back a disappointed sigh. She hated occasions where she had to interact closely with his followers. The celebrations were a different matter, because they were always so crowded that she could get away with spending the briefest amounts of time talking to whoever approached her before slipping away. When it was smaller groups, she had no such luxury.

But this is for Lucio's sake, she reminded herself, allowing Draco to lead her into the bedroom and then to the closet where she let him take charge and pick out a dress for her.

He chose a floor-length dark-green gown to complement the shirt he wore underneath his robe, helping her to step into it and zipping it up along her back. Hermione held her hair out

of the way and he pressed a kiss to the nape of her neck.

“And we can’t forget,” he said, giving her a lick before he conjured the emerald choker around her throat. The heat of his saliva clashed against the sudden cold of the chain—Hermione shivered, turning to face him.

“Ready?” he asked.

Resigning herself, Hermione took his arm and nodded.

The book in her lap was heavy and stiff, rarely opened. Hermione had flipped through its pages, trying to take in new information and failing, her focus trained on her son and his playmates. She and Draco had greeted them all, a group of four children, two boys and two girls, escorted by their proud parents. Hermione recognized them from Draco’s mass of followers. They had been in the last event—she vaguely remembered having seen them sitting close to the throne.

Draco had proudly welcomed them into their home, smiling wide, clutching Hermione to his side. She had mirrored his smile, greeted them all warmly when it was her turn to speak, and she had bent down to take the hands of each of the slightly nervous looking children to learn their names. They had both graciously accepted the bows offered to them and the compliments about Lucio, too. He’d let out a nervous giggle when he had been bowed to but covered it with his hands. Draco had shot him a look but Hermione hadn’t noticed—hadn’t needed to, for she’d sensed his displeasure anyway.

Luckily, their son hadn’t noticed. Lucio had been standing restlessly beside his mother, resisting the urge to hold her hand because he wanted to look grown-up, almost bouncing on his heels from excitement. The children all stared at each other curiously.

Pansy and a disguised Luna had collected them and herded them to the nursery where they might socialize on their own and relax.

Hermione, Draco, and the four sets of parents had stayed behind in the drawing room to talk. She’d dreaded that part, but it had gone well. Highly aware of the honor being bestowed on them, the other sets of parents made a lively bunch and had a great conversation about nothing in particular, trading gossip and news about people Hermione didn’t know.

“We’re most grateful for the invitation to our Flora,” Mrs. Allora Crabach said. “She is our only child. I’ve been so fearful she might have felt lonely without siblings to play with. I’m sure she’ll be quite the perfect companion to your son, my Lady.”

“I certainly hope so,” Hermione had replied with a smile.

Hermione had assessed each of the parents quietly when the attention was not on her. For as friendly and engaging as they seemed, she had to remind herself she barely knew them, and worse off, they were Draco’s followers. Behind those winning smiles and polite behavior was nothing but rot. Of course they would benefit from this close exposure to her family. If Draco liked them enough, he might eventually hold them in close confidence. Their children would have more privileges than most, to be allowed over and over into this house and to

have Lucio's favor should they become friends. The two little girls, and Flora—no doubt their mothers would hope and possibly scheme towards a romance between them and Lucio.

She felt tired suddenly, thinking it all over. Why must everything have motive behind it? Couldn't things just stay at surface level? Lucio needed friends. That was all. She hated being suspicious and wary of everything and everyone she came across, but it was too ingrained in her now.

Draco had put his hand on her knee.

"We've held the same concern for our son," he said. "Which is why we set this up. But we've also devoted our efforts to bring him more company through other means."

Their small audience caught on and smiled.

"How delightful!" the other mother, Mrs. Tippet, said. "That's wonderful news. We pray you have quick success."

Hermione's smile was wooden.

"Thank you," she said.

One of the mothers leaned forward. "I'm sure you're wanting a girl this time, my Lady, are you not?"

"She does," Draco said with a squeeze of Hermione's thigh, "but whatever we're blessed with, we'll be happy."

One of them men laughed. "I pray you are blessed with twins, then, to settle the matter."

Draco grinned and turned to face Hermione. His eyes were excited, hypnotic with their beauty.

"That would make a lovely compromise, wouldn't it, my love?"

"A thing like that," Hermione said, her fake smile painful now. "Well, if we *do* get twins, I'd want them to be girls."

Another wave of laughs from their visitors. A headache was starting to form in her temples. Hermione wished they would leave.

What felt like much later, they finally did. Pansy had seen them all to the door with a reminder to return in another hour for their children.

Draco, meanwhile, had taken Hermione's arm.

"That went very well," he said approvingly. "What do you think?"

Regardless of her dislike for his followers, she'd found no obvious reason to reject them. Yet.

"I suppose they'll do," she said. He was leading her out of the room and into the hall. Pansy had already gone back to the nursery to rejoin Luna and the children. Where was Neville?

“Unless you know something about them that I don’t, in which case you should tell me,” she continued.

“Nobody’s perfect, firebird,” he said with a chuckle. “Nobody that associates with me has clean hands. But I have no meaningful complaints on any of them yet.”

His arm was tight around her, steering her into the library. He walked her inside swiftly.

From the other side of the room, Martin looked at them from behind his canvas, surprised. There was a streak of green paint across one cheek.

“Good day, my Lord and Lady,” he said, bowing.

“Carry on, Martin,” Draco said with a nod. “We’ve just come to collect some books.”

Hermione looked at Draco, confused. He’d mentioned nothing of the sort beforehand. He was already steering her towards the other side of the room, behind some bookcases that obscured their view of the painter, and vice versa.

“What are we looking for, then?” Hermione asked. She had a feeling it wasn’t books he wanted, and was proved right when he stepped in close, one arm pulling her into him.

He leaned toward her, caging her against rows of books.

“The only thing I want to find is your dripping cunt,” Draco breathed into her ear. “Pull up your skirt and show me, sweetheart.”

Hermione shivered, but didn’t move.

“You’ll have to wait,” she said firmly. “I want to go see how Lucio is doing.”

Draco frowned. “Pansy and Lovegood are with him, he’s fine. Besides, you know how friendly the boy is. He’s probably doing very well. Let him be. He doesn’t need your constant supervision. Not when you’re occupied with me.”

“Well, I want to make sure everything’s alright,” Hermione said. “And of course he needs supervision—he’s still a boy, Draco.”

“Coddling him at every turn won’t do him any favors when he’s grown, Hermione,” Draco insisted. Hermione turned to try to leave but he wouldn’t let her, his arms trapping her against the bookcase. Hermione was suddenly aware of how quiet the library was—they’d been speaking at regular volume, and she worried now that Martin had overheard.

She took in a deep breath, let it out slowly before she lost her temper.

“I’m not trying to coddle him, Draco,” she said. “I’m... I’m just nervous. He doesn’t have much experience playing with other children. I want to make sure he doesn’t get hurt.”

“They wouldn’t dare bully him,” Draco said, a thunderous look crossing his face. “Their parents will have instructed them to be on their best behavior. If I hear of any ill-behavior from their children towards my son, there must be punishment, and they know that.”

“You wouldn’t harm a child,” Hermione said, glaring at him. “You wouldn’t stoop that low, Draco.”

“The threat was issued to the parents, not the children,” he said, softening his tone, watching the faint creases between her brows smooth out.

“If that’s the case, then very well,” she finally said.

“Good,” Draco said, nuzzling at her throat. His other hand traveled down to cup her ass, squeezing it hard. “Now that’s settled I trust you’ll indulge your husband and stay put.”

Hermione let him kiss her, let his tongue slide in. She thought of Martin, standing not too far away, thinking he had to know what they were doing back here. It brought heat to her face, to other parts of her.

“Let’s go to your study,” she whispered when they’d broken apart. His hands were on the neckline of her gown, tearing it apart to bare her chest to his greedy mouth.

“No,” he said. “I want you here.”

Then he dove back in, spreading a wildfire across her clavicle, trailing it down to her bared breasts. His mouth ravaged one and his hand massaged the other, teasing her hardened nipples relentlessly so that she let her head fall back and moaned, conflicted.

“That’s right, firebird,” he encouraged her gently in a hoarse whisper. “Give in to me. You know you want it, too.”

Hermione’s hand went to his chest, the other to grip his throat. Her eyes flashed red.

“To the bedroom,” she said in a strange hiss, “or not at all.”

Draco stared at her, entranced, his knees threatening to buckle.

“As my queen commands,” he relented, and without another moment’s hesitation he grasped her tight and Apparated them away to the bedroom.

Hermione cried out, her hands gripping fistfuls of her husband’s hair as his tongue and fingers worked at her, pumping into her, winding up the pleasure that roared like waves in her belly. He had been working her up for a while now, two rounds already behind them and her insides full of his seed. He was still hard, his eyes blazing with desire as he worked to spoil his wife with pleasure.

“Draco—” she panted, her breasts heaving with each shallow breath. “Yes, just like that. Don’t you dare stop.”

She was starting to shake all over and it was building to the point she could not control it. His tongue was a long, heavenly, wicked thing-now and then he looked up, a possessive gleam in his eye as he feasted on her. Knowing she was on the precipice of her climax, he mounted her once more, sliding into her heat with a sharp thrust. She came hard, unable to even cry out in the throes of passion, tears sliding down her cheeks. Draco clutched her to him, gasping at his own release, his heart pounding hard in his chest.

“Mine,” he rasped, his eyes falling shut. His entire body thrummed with pleasure, with her proximity and heat. He could smell their combined scents around them and it felt *right*.

Hermione exhaled shakily—he could feel his seed leaking from her already. It flooded out of her in short spurts, staining the sheets beneath them, sliding down his skin from where they were joined.

When he finally opened his eyes, he saw his wife, her dark brown eyes fixed on the ceiling and leaking tears.

“Firebird,” he said, concerned. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she said, her voice a little strained. “It was just a little intense, that’s all.”

Preening a little, Draco brushed his mouth along her jawline, pressed a kiss at the hollow of her throat.

“It was for me, too,” he murmured. And he continued dotting her flesh with light, sweet kisses, holding her carefully in his arms.

Just then the sound of children laughing sliced across the stillness of the manor from the first floor—Hermione heard Pansy’s voice through them, instructing Luna to fetch all their cloaks, as the children had expressed a wish to play outside in the snow. Their voices were high and childish, all blending together into one jumble, but she recognized Lucio’s over the rest immediately. Though she couldn’t determine exactly what he was saying, she heard the excitement and happiness in his voice. It made her heart swell with love.

“What a happy sound, isn’t it?” Draco murmured into her flesh, grinning so wide his sharp teeth gleamed. “A house full of children.”

“Indeed, my Lord,” Hermione said. “I hope Lucio will learn a lot from playing with the others. He’ll make a wonderful older brother in time.”

“Then let’s not keep him waiting too long,” Draco said, and his gaze on hers was loving. He bent his neck to kiss her. He was still lodged inside her, still painfully erect. He gave a slow thrust, felt the breath leave Hermione’s lungs in one warm gust of air.

“You are too eager, my Lord,” Hermione said, laughing, but her legs opened a little wider to ease his access. Draco rolled his hips again, feeling his buttocks flex as he pressed into her.

“I fail to see how that’s a problem.”

“You’d have me pregnant every single year if you could,” she said, with a raised brow.

“Wouldn’t that be a marvel?” Draco asked blissfully. ‘But I wouldn’t put you under that sort of stress, sweetling. I know I’m quite the randy beast, but I wouldn’t dare do that to you, appealing as it may sound.’ He puffed out a laugh. “I don’t want *that* many children.”

“How many are you aiming for, then?” Hermione asked, raising a brow, failing in her attempt to look stern, because she too was still hungry and wet and his presence inside her was always so distracting.

He smiled. “Eight.”

“*Eight?*”

He was laughing—a rich, wonderful sound. Hermione stared at him, demanding an explanation.

“Goodness, you’ve gone so pale, firebird,” he said. “I only meant it in jest. Anything less than six will do.”

Her stupefied expression failed to fade.

“That’s still too many,” she declared. “Besides, if it’s *my* body producing them, I think the final say should be mine, Draco.”

He pretended to think it over. She smacked his shoulder, and then bit her lip to bite back a moan when he thrust again, pressing himself deep inside her. The flush returned to her cheeks. He felt her clench around him and hissed.

“Perhaps we can agree on a healthy number,” he said, reaching up to cup one of her breasts in his hand. His thumb dragged over her hardened nipple. His hips were working up to a rougher, faster pace now. She reached down between their bodies to play with herself. Their flesh slapped together over and over, coated in their combined fluids.

Hermione let her head fall back and press deeper into her pillow, let him fold and arrange her body however he liked to satisfy his need. First it was one leg over his shoulder, and then he had both slung over them so she was bent in half and he was plowing her good and deep so that she could hardly form sentences. Draco grit his teeth, devoting all his energy to their combined pleasure. It was working. Hermione was still working at herself, her eyes fixed on his, entranced, her lips parted and gasping. Her breasts bounced deliciously with each thrust, her nipples rosy and tender from his mouth.

“Marry me,” he gasped to her, each nerve in his body alight with fire. “Marry me, firebird. Make me the happiest of men, Hermione. Be mine with your entire heart, and not one lie between us.”

Her eyes went huge with shock and confusion. Her climax choked her as it crashed down—she could not speak, and instead cried out.

Her hands gripped his arms tight, digging into his biceps. Draco gave three final thrusts and exploded inside her with a roar, sank himself deep to not let a drop go to waste.

She was quivering sweetly underneath him, tears rolling down her face from the strength of her orgasm, so soon after the other.

“Hermione,” he repeated hoarsely, gripping her face in his hands. “Hermione, my beautiful witch—I can’t live without you. You are my life. You own my heart completely, and my soul, if it exists. Marry me.”

Her eyes opened, starry, glazed, spent—he held his breath, his heart racing. Her cunt was still actively milking him, squeezing him hard over and over, riding out the final moments of her orgasm. They’d been together for years by now, but Draco felt this was one of if not their most intimate moment together yet, aside from whenever they fed from each other.

“Yes,” she whispered, and then moaned, shaking as a triumphant Draco carefully let her legs down, and still inside her, leaned in to kiss her passionately. He had not felt such pure, unadulterated joy for non-sinister reasons in ages—it warmed him thoroughly.

“Thank you, my love,” he said. He sucked on her tongue briefly, extricated himself from her so that he could help her sit up and crush her to him in an embrace. She clung to him, still

shaking a little, wondering if the past minute had been a hallucination.

She was still crying when he let her go and sat back on his knees.

“What is it?” he asked, worried.

“*Why?*” she asked. “You caught me off guard.”

“Did you not mean to say yes?” he asked, his heart plummeting.

“No,” she said shakily. “I meant it. But why did you propose? We’re already married, Draco.”

“I stole you the first time,” he said. “And I bound us together with a cursed ring without your consent. Do you really want to keep that memory?”

“I was under the impression you were proud of the way it happened,” she said, “considering how you boast about it to everyone.”

She had him there.

“I’m not ashamed of it,” he said. “But I wanted to give you the choice to do it again, and properly. So we can put that unpleasantness behind us. There was no wedding. You deserved one. A grand ceremony. I want the world to hear my vows to you.”

“I don’t *want* a wedding,” Hermione replied, shaking her head. ‘I don’t need a fancy dress, or a ceremony, Draco.’ She studied him hard. “What would you have done if I’d said no?”

“We’d stay together,” he said. “We *are* already married, like you said. I just thought you would appreciate a second chance, to make it right.”

He took her hand, traced a finger over her ring finger.

“I never properly proposed to you,” he said. “I went about everything backwards. I don’t regret it, but it means we missed a lot.”

“You only have yourself to blame for it,” Hermione said. She gave a shuddery exhale. “I suppose a true ceremony wouldn’t be so bad. If it’s what you want, my Lord. But only if it’s just us. Nobody else needs to be there. Will you promise me that?”

“Only if you agree to wear a fancy dress for me,” Draco said with a smirk.

Hermione laughed and nodded. He kissed the back of her hand.

“I’ve been working on the ring,” he said. “I want you to wear it again.”

She had gone still.

“I’m taking the enchantments off of it,” he explained, sensing her wariness. “You’ll see for yourself when it’s ready. But I miss seeing it on your finger.”

“*All* the enchantments?” Hermione asked.

“Yes.” He kissed her hand again. “I never want to fear losing you again if your magic goes awry because of the ring. I’ve learned to trust you.”

Hermione squeezed his hand. “Thank you, my Lord. That means so much to me.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it,” he said. “But don’t think I’ve gone soft, my love. I’m no different than I was yesterday, and there will be dire consequences if you abuse my trust.”

Hermione glared at him. “You ruined the last ten minutes by making that threat.”

He laughed. “Why did you expect any different from me?”

“Oh,” Hermione said faintly. “That’s right. You’ve been a bastard from the day I met you.”

“That’s right,” he agreed, “but this is the bastard you just agreed to marry.”

“Well, you’re a cheat, for proposing to me like that,” she said indignantly, a deep flush on her cheeks.

“I’d planned it differently, to be honest,” Draco chuckled, rising from the bed. “But the moment felt right.”

She hated to agree, but he was right. She glanced at the clock.

“The parents will be coming back soon,” she warned. She was still damp with sweat, and leaking cum. Once, the feeling of his fluids in her had disgusted her to her core. Now, it didn’t bother her as much. She felt sated. Content, even.

As a sharp contrast, Draco was just smug. He’d come over to her and began to clean her off with magic. Hermione returned the favor, working fast, wanting to leave and go see how the children were doing.

“Did Erik tell you about my results?” she asked.

“He did,” he said, and then frowned. “Shit. We didn’t use a potion.”

“I’m sure you’ll have that remedied by tomorrow,” Hermione sighed.

[THE NEXT DAY]

Draco made a day of it to acquire the new decorations for the manor, towing a disguised Neville behind him all the way. He had wanted to invite his wife but ultimately kept the purpose of his trip a secret, wanting to surprise her instead.

He met with several art dealers, going from gallery to gallery and sometimes to museums, spending a small fortune at each location. He assessed everything he saw with a critical eye, picturing its future position in the manor, and gauging whether it aligned to his wife’s tastes, above all. Statues, busts, paintings and tapestries joined his new collection. Some were fairly new and made by newer and upcoming artists, but the majority were old-some ancient relics-and priceless. He spent without flickering an eyelid. Behind him, Neville was barely able to contain his amazement at each acquisition.

As planned, Draco’s careful selections aligned to the standards he’d set for himself. The paintings he had bought were mostly landscapes and still-lives, or beautiful portraits of women in pastures or gazing solemnly into wells, in groups or alone. He made a special trip to Florence, Italy, to seize the most important additions to his new collection.

The Borghese gallery had been contacted ahead of time of his visit. The place was empty of other visitors when he and Neville walked inside. The owner had led him to the statues he'd come for, both by the same artist: Gian Lorenzo Bernini. He took a long time in his appraisal of *The Rape of Proserpine* and *Apollo and Daphne*. Though they were made of marble he felt as though there was a pulse behind each sculpture, and that they called to him.

It was not an easy task to acquire them. The owners had offered to loan them to him for a specific amount of time, not keen on the idea of selling them outright. The works were famous, world-renown, and historically significant to the city. Draco, annoyed by their subtle denial, Imperiused them at last when he'd had enough. They finally agreed to sell the pair of statues for a more than fair price, and agreed to keep the name of the new owner of the works in their records anonymous. They also agreed not to ask for the works back at any point, as he had no intention of doing so.

By the time he finally got back home, some of the artwork had already arrived. He'd sent word ahead to Pansy, Neville, and Luna that they should be taken and stored in one of the grand empty rooms carefully until every last piece had arrived so they could all be installed on the same day to surprise his wife. It must all remain a secret until the last possible second. Every instruction had been followed to the letter, and so he was terribly pleased.

The playdates became a common occurrence within the manor, and so once and sometimes twice a week, Lucio had company that was his own age, and he reveled in it. Though they stayed in the nursery much of the time the sounds of young, excited voices leaked out into the hall. Even if they were heavily muffled by the door one could tell the children were having a good time. That was all Hermione had hoped for—it felt a little easier to breathe every time she heard it.

She joined Pansy and Luna in overseeing the playdates, too curious to stay away. The other children behaved well, and she made a conscious effort to study their characters individually. Lucio, for his part, was overly excited to have friends at last, and asked them for stories about where they lived, and their pets and siblings if they had any. He held no qualms about meeting with these strange children and spent most of the first few playdates talking up a storm, firing question after question until Hermione had pulled him aside carefully and suggested he pause for a moment, as the other children were beginning to look weary. Sweet child that he was, Lucio understood at once and obeyed, switching to showing them about the nursery, and then, with Hermione and Pansy watching them carefully, the garden.

He was only too happy to share his toys and food and had naturally taken the role as leader among them all. Or perhaps it had silently been bestowed on him, Hermione thought, for the other children, bright as they were, seemed to defer to him in everything.

It began to remind her of Draco and his cronies, Crabbe and Goyle (and sometimes Blaise), when they had still been in school. She didn't like the idea of the other children becoming subservient and silent behind her son, following the silly pecking order that had been established from his title of Draco's heir. She had made the mistake of mentioning this to Draco, who she hadn't realized preferred this to happen.

“Our son must grow accustomed to leading and having others follow his example,” he’d replied staunchly. “He’ll learn how to command a room and how to strike fear into others like a dagger, and it all starts with the growing of his confidence. This is how it was done for me, sweetling, and so it’ll be the same for him.”

Although Hermione didn’t argue the prospect of their son growing into a respectable and powerful man, she knew there was a very fine line between confidence and arrogance. Draco’s parents had clearly allowed their son to sprint over that line early in his youth, and she wanted to prevent that. She made a point of it to talk about this to Lucio one day before tucking him in to bed.

To her surprise, Lucio had brought it up first. By then it had been three weeks of regular playdates, and something had troubled him enough that he felt his mother would know the answer.

“Mother,” he began. He held the worn copy of *Peter Pan* from which she had just read to him in his hands.

“Yes, darling?” she asked, reaching forward to move his hair away from his eyes.

“The other children,” he said— “Are they frightened of us?”

Hermione blinked.

“What makes you think that?”

“They look scared, sometimes,” he said. “Flora told me her mother said she mustn’t make me angry ever. And that if I want to kiss her, she should let me.”

Hermione’s stomach sank. She sat down on the foot of his bed, a grim set to her mouth.

“I want to make some things very clear,” she started. “You aren’t in trouble, darling. But it’s important for you to know this.”

Lucio nodded gravely.

“You must *always* ask before you touch or kiss somebody,” she said. “Always. It’s a very bad thing to do it when the other person doesn’t want it. You’re too young to think about kissing and that sort of thing, but it still stands. Flora’s mother told her that because she wants to gain favor with you, with our family.”

A wrinkle formed at the bridge of Lucio’s nose.

“What does that mean?”

“It means,” Hermione replied heavily, “that they want to get close to us. They want us to like them.”

“But I already like them,” Lucio said, looking confused.

“I know,” Hermione said. “Your father and I like them, too.”

Not entirely true, but not a complete lie either—but now wasn’t the time to get into technicalities.

"Thanks to your father, our family is in a very high position. You know he is a leader of sorts."

"Like a king," Lucio said, nodding and looking a little proud, holding the book to his chest. "Is that why his friends always bow to us?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, dearest."

"Am I a prince, then?" he asked.

She couldn't help but smile.

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

The conversation was veering off track. Hermione cleared her throat.

"You must remember, Lucio: no matter who you are or what position you have in society, you should always treat others with kindness and respect. Your father will probably tell you the opposite, that power and control are the only ways to get respect. Well, he's wrong. Making people fear you can get you respect, but it will also make people hate you and be frightened of you. If you want to be truly respected and liked, you must treat everyone as an equal."

Lucio took this all in seriously, his eyes wide. He nodded.

"Then have I done something wrong?" he asked. "If the other children are already scared of me? I don't want them to be."

"No," Hermione said, cupping his cheek in her hand. "I think they're just nervous. They want you to like them. But I also think all their parents have told them to agree with you at any cost to stay on your good side. That can create problems where they feel they have to hide their true feelings to keep you happy, and that isn't fair. It's important to be authentic and compassionate, so they know they can be themselves around you. Do you understand?"

Lucio nodded.

"I think so," he said slowly. Then he smiled, looking relieved. "Thank you, mummy."

Hermione reached forward to wrap her arms tightly around her son.

"You're welcome, darling," she said. "I'm so glad you have friends now. If you have any more questions come to me before you ask your father, okay?"

Because he won't like anything of what I just told you, and when he finds out he'll do the best he can to forget it.

With Lucio tucked in and falling asleep, Hermione set off for the library. She'd just touched her hand to the doorknob when Draco's voice slipped into her mind.

What is my sweet wife up to now? He asked.

It had been a busy day. They hadn't seen much of each other since lunch, and he had not joined her and the others for dinner.

I was just reading to Lucio, and I've just come back. I'm going to get a book from the library now.

Very well, he said. I'll meet you for bed, then. I'd drag you to the bedroom now but I'm afraid I'm much too busy now. I'll have to wait until after dinner.

Look at you waiting, for once, Hermione teased. Remarkable.

Don't tease me, he replied, a little grouchy. Else I'll surprise you in the library and have you there in front of Martin if he's still there.

He very much was. Hermione had managed to persuade him to stay for a little longer at seeing how occupied Draco was that day. On what, she didn't bother to determine—not when there was a ripe opportunity to take.

The image of Draco's suggestion instantly materialized before her mind's eye. Her legs turned to jelly.

Very well, she finally replied with some effort. It'll just have to wait.

And then she cut off the connection before he could reply, and entered the library.

Martin nibbled on her earlobe, a soft laugh puffing from his chest. Hermione leaned her head backward to give him better access, draped across his lap comfortably.

His free hand cupped one breast over her gown, kneading it firmly over the flimsy silk. Her nipple was hard and taut underneath, pressing against the fabric—he tweaked it gently, making her shiver.

"If Draco should ever find us, I don't want you to be afraid," she said suddenly. "I don't know how he'd react. Don't challenge him, and don't worry about me. Worry about yourself, first."

"Even if I promise you now," he said, "I don't know if I could uphold it should it happen. He's unpredictable."

"I know," Hermione said. "But I mean it. If he tells you to leave, then go. I'll protect you regardless, but don't try to do the same for me. I don't need it."

Martin took her chin in his hand.

"What if he hurts you?" he asked softly, worry creasing the skin between his brows.

"I can take care of myself," she said, putting her hand over his. "I have my power back. I'll be fine. And I think he'd be angrier with you than me. Now, will you promise me you'll do as I say?"

She was looking intently into his eyes. Martin nodded slowly, entranced by her stare. Her eyes were such a dark brown, but in the light there was a strange red glimmer to them.

"I promise," he finally said.

She smiled sadly.

“Thank you.”

Now she sat up, still feeling a little tender from their earlier activities. All physical evidence of that was gone now, but she still carried the memory like an errant ember from a fire deep in the vault of her mind. The library was dark and quiet—she had dismissed Pansy and Luna hours ago, told them to take an early night and do as they wished so she could have her privacy here. All the better, to keep what would happen next a total secret.

“I need you to do something for me.”

“Anything,” he said at once.

“My portrait,” she said. “I want you to animate it now.”

30. The Portrait of a Lady

“You have something on your mind,” came Lord Malfoy’s voice from his desk.

Neville twitched, stationed by the door, his posture rigid.

“My Lord?”

“I can see it in your face,” Malfoy said. He had been poring over a book, scribbling down notes now and then. Neville wasn’t aware he had been watching him.

Lord Malfoy looked up to meet Neville’s eye.

“Speak freely. You have my permission.”

Neville hesitated.

“It’s so quiet here,” he said. “So still... heavy.”

The Dark Lord looked as though he’d expected him to bring that up.

“That’s partly by design,” he said, closing his book with a quiet *snap*. “To unsettle strangers in my home, and to soothe my wife.”

Soothe? Neville thought incredulously. *This is no different to living in a crypt. How could anyone find it soothing? It could drive anyone mad.*

The Dark Lord was smiling.

“I suppose it’s working, then, if you find it unbearable.”

“I never said—” Neville began, but the Dark Lord gave him a knowing look, and he said no more.

Since coming here, he lied awake in bed most nights, wrapped in the heavy silence of the manor, straining to hear anything that was not the thundering rush of total stillness. It was almost a relief to wake in the mornings when the birds began to sing, and tend to his duties, to speak with the others, and see signs of life. But night always returned to start the cycle anew. He couldn’t help but wonder if it had ever affected Hermione in that way, too.

Likely not. If Malfoy kept her trapped in his bed every night, then her case was very different.

Lord Malfoy smiled.

“For all your obedience, you’re still terrible at hiding the loathing in your eyes,” he said, sounding unbothered. “You ought to take care of that before I grow weary of it. I won’t have you disrespect me in front of my faithful. They don’t know who you are, after all, and would think it strange to see a servant of mine look at me in such an insolent manner.”

“Of course, my Lord,” Neville said stiffly. There was a snarky reply at the tip of his tongue that he had to cut off lest it slip loose. He didn’t want to press his luck.

“Take a look at that cabinet there,” Lord Malfoy ordered, gesturing lazily to the glass-doored cabinet to Neville’s left. “See anything familiar?”

Neville went to it, stared dutifully at the contents laid about within. It took a moment to let his gaze wade through the junk amassed there. He was frowning, trying to make sense of it. He’d never thought of Malfoy as a trinket keeper. When he saw what the Dark Lord wanted him to see, he went still.

“What do you see?” Lord Malfoy asked.

Neville’s voice was flat.

“I see my ear, my Lord.”

“What do you think?”

Neville gave a faint shake of his head. He had gone quite pale.

“Why keep it?”

His eyes now strayed to the other items, studying them carefully, unable to make sense of them. His eyes found the ribbon next and he frowned.

“Why does anyone keep anything?” Malfoy mused from his desk where he still sat, taking in Neville’s reaction with great interest. “For the memories, of course.”

“You’ve preserved it.”

“I’d rather not let a trophy of mine decay.”

Neville shouldn’t have been shocked by this revelation. Somehow, he still was. Whenever he thought he knew Malfoy, he was proved wrong quite quickly. He’d never thought a morbid relic like the ones in that cabinet could hold such value. What did the others mean? Could they all be related to previous kills of his? His head spun at the implication, at the sheer volume of artifacts.

“That’s Hermione’s,” he said, catching sight of the old hair ribbon, which also looked like it had been magically preserved, for it didn’t look a day older than the last time he’d seen Hermione wear it.

Lord Malfoy raised his brow, impressed.

“You’re the first to recognize it. Well—you’re the first to *say* you recognize it. Poor Pansy nearly swallowed her tongue when she found out. She was too afraid to ask, but she’s clever enough to figure it out.”

Neville frowned.

“How did you know she knew, my Lord?”

“I don’t draw attention to the cabinet,” Lord Malfoy said simply. “It’s been here for years and I keep it to the side and disorganized on purpose. It took her quite a while to get the courage to look at it—I suppose there were enough horrors in the other corner of the house so I don’t blame her. I sent her here to fetch me something once, and she came back and I looked into her thoughts to see if she’d done it. That was how I found out.”

“So you *can* read thoughts,” Neville said, almost accusingly.

“I can see their *memories*, and I don’t use it as often as you think,” Lord Malfoy said with an air of pretentiousness. “It can be helpful, but it takes away the edge of an unpredictable life sometimes. I’d rather go in blind for the novelty.”

That didn’t do much to put Neville at ease. He was looking back at the cabinet.

“You take something from everyone, then,” he said. “Have you taken anything from Luna?”

Draco didn’t respond.

Neville grit his teeth.

“...my Lord.”

“Why don’t you take a closer look?” was the Dark Lord’s infuriating reply.

Heart pounding with dread, Neville did, until he found the broken halves of Luna’s wand, sitting off to the side on the same shelf as his ear.

His stomach sank.

“Not as striking as an ear, I’ll admit,” Lord Malfoy said calmly. “But a good memento nonetheless.”

Neville couldn’t help the surge of hate that boiled inside him. His fists clenched, and he pictured himself launching himself at Malfoy, fists flying and sinking into his loathsome, haughty face.

He made himself look away from the cabinet, struggling to cool down.

“And did you take something from Harry, too, my Lord?” he asked, barely able to keep the bite from his tone.

“Look at you. Your loyalty is remarkable,” Lord Malfoy said with a sneer. “Tell me: who’s left to appreciate it? Everyone it mattered to is dead, except you and your woman. You think the rest of your pathetic resistance will dare stand against me now, if my Eyes haven’t killed them all yet?”

Stay calm, Neville was saying to himself. *He wants you to retaliate. Stay. Calm.*

“Dust owns your loyalty now,” he continued, his voice heavy and deep. “Bones and dust. I doubt ghosts will emerge from their tombs to harangue you about your choices now.”

Neville said nothing.

“You’ve spent so much of your life fighting a battle that wasn’t really yours,” the Dark Lord continued. “Well, it’s done. I won it all. Lay it to rest. Join me, as Hermione did. You know it’s the wisest choice.”

“Are you asking for my answer, my Lord?”

“Do you have one to give?” Lord Malfoy asked. “Have my two little lovebirds come to a consensus?”

"Luna says no, my Lord," Neville said, staring at the wall beside the cabinet.

"I thought she might. But what do *you* think?"

There was no point in lying.

"I've... considered it."

"A sad conundrum indeed," Lord Malfoy said. "I'm pleased to hear one of you has sense. Take more time to convince her."

"I didn't say my mind was made up, my Lord," Neville said.

"It isn't," the Dark Lord agreed. "Not yet. Take the time nonetheless. Your agreement must be unanimous. I won't spare one and kill the other go—it's all or nothing. Do you understand?"

Hermione dreamt of the roaring earth more frequently. It was always dark in those nightmares, always some hideous, great noise filling the air around her—so hard to decipher. Her hands were steady and yet she felt such a fire inside her that she expected to crumble into a pile of ashes.

The space around her was dark and empty—she could make out make forms and shapes, but never discern anything concrete. The floor was always wet under her bare feet. She might have been anywhere.

She would reach out, trying to walk, but found herself rooted to the ground, unable to even lift one toe from the floor. When she tried to speak, there was only the guttural, dying anguish of Danielle's final breaths and a terror and urgency so great that it seemed to rattle the earth even more.

Hermione received her period one day later, to her great relief. The sheets underneath her were wet with blood when she sat up groggily, one hand on her aching abdomen.

She hadn't noticed the blood until she'd stood and felt it leak down her thighs, the cool air against her wet, heated skin.

"Oh—" she said. A silent sigh of relief pushed out of her lips.

She'd been on contraceptives of either form for so long—it had turned her periods irregular in the periods she went off them... at Draco's discretion, of course. Though she tried to track them it didn't seem worth the effort, seeing as in the past she'd had no control over her body. If Draco had wanted to make her pregnant again, he would have done so.

Now that they were actively trying and that she was somewhat amenable to the idea, it was a different story. Though she'd known to expect it, sometimes it just didn't arrive, and not because she was pregnant, but other imbalances in her body. Considering the trauma and stress she'd gone through year after year, it only made sense. Still, she hadn't actually

expected it to appear this time around. Yet, seeing it there, vivid and wet on the sheets, gave her a sense of calm she sorely needed.

When she'd turned to look at the bed, she saw Draco had noticed it too.

She only just remembered to make herself look disappointed as she met his eye. He too seemed displeased, but genuinely.

Hermione cleared the mess from the bed and then from her thighs. They'd had sex the night before, and she cursed herself for falling asleep without putting some clothes on. If she hadn't bled all over the bed, then Draco wouldn't have noticed.

He'll be in a foul mood now.

"Are you angry?" she asked.

He had risen from the bed and came to her, wrapped his arms around her, crushing her against his body.

"You know I'm impatient, sweetling," he said, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "I'm disappointed, not angry. But it isn't aimed at you. Far from it."

Martin had not arrived yet. Lucio was being escorted to his lessons now and Draco, smiling mysteriously, had excused himself without giving a reason why, saying only that he had something important to attend to and so would not return until later that day.

"Summon your pet if you like," he'd told her before leaving. "But make sure you're nice and wet and sweet for me when I arrive."

"Do I have reason to worry?" she'd asked, frowning.

"Not at all," he'd said, and his smile had turned even more cryptic.

Hermione asked Pansy afterward what was going on. Sympathetic, Pansy had shaken her head.

"I'm not allowed to say," she'd said. "But—it isn't bad. I don't *think*. It's a surprise. That's all I can give you."

Hermione bit her lip and nodded, took her friend by the hand and squeezed it.

"Thank you."

They had moved the so-far completed paintings into the next room—a large bedroom that had always been unoccupied.

Her portrait was fully dry by then, so Martin had covered it with a white sheet and sat it down on an armchair to keep prying eyes off it. Draco's completed portrait had been leaned against a wall on the opposite side of the room, also fully varnished, dried, and covered with a white sheet to keep dust away.

Hermione walked up to her portrait now, her pulse speeding up, each footfall silent on the carpeted floor.

The white sheet came off with a whisper of fabric. She let it fall to the floor and gazed at the painting, bracing herself, and with her hand gestured at the window on the far side of the room to undo the curtains and fill the room with light.

Lucio had it right—it really was like looking into a mirror. It made her feel uneasy. For as large as the painting was, her own likeness was about half her real-life height.

She stared at herself, fighting the uneasiness that spread inside her like an oil slick.

Her painted self stared back. At first she was completely still, but Hermione had seen that flicker of consciousness in her eye, and it made her heart jump.

Her gaze was open, a little guarded. She did not move but to blink. She studied herself intently, and neither said a word for a moment in the utter stillness of the room.

It was one thing to interact with a painted portrait of somebody else. It was another thing *entirely* when that person was oneself.

It was better than a mirror. It was worse than a mirror. Hermione wanted to simultaneously step in close and to lurch backward, fascinated and horrified in equal amounts.

Every painting at Hogwarts was of dead people, Hermione thought, remembering all the ancient paintings the institution had housed. *Traditionally, portraits aren't animated until one's death, according to what I've read. I'm still alive... I think.*

Was there another reason why Draco had wanted these portraits of the family done like this? Had he not already created them, she would have suspected that he would have intended to use the portraits as vessels for more Horcruxes. A vile notion.

That doesn't mean he'll never try to make another, the warped voice said to her. *You must be on high alert. For all his efforts to prove otherwise, he still cannot be trusted.*

Hermione silently agreed, but her thoughts were more focused on the painting as she began to move.

Slowly, her painted self sat up on the chaise and stood elegantly, the green gown falling from where it had gathered as she sat to fall down her legs like a silk waterfall, never breaking eye contact with Hermione. Moving slowly, as if she too was highly apprehensive, she walked up to the surface of the canvas, growing larger as she did so, until her legs disappeared, and she met Hermione at her own size and height.

From that perspective, Hermione could see the smooth shine of the varnish on her likeness, the brushstrokes that made up her hair, long and untamed, the tiny daubs of pure white Martin had added to her eyes that made them shine with life. Inside the painting, the brilliant shine of the green silk was as bright as a jewel—to match it, there was a glimmer of bright red in her iris.

She looked curious—hungry, in a sense. Guarded, above all.

Do I look that way, too? Hermione wondered. That red called to her.

The woman in the painting raised her hand to the surface, pressed her palm against it.

Hermione reached up without thinking and mirrored her, touching their hands together.

The canvas was textured under her palm. She had held her breath, wondering if she would be able to feel anything. She'd almost expected to feel warmth from her likeness. There was no warmth, but she did feel a strange shiver roll down her arm.

They stayed that way for a long moment, swaddled in the thick silence of the bedroom. Her likeness closed her eyes briefly, a slight frown on her face. When she opened her eyes again, there was a deep understanding in them.

There was slight pain in her eyes as she looked at herself. The painted mouth opened and spoke.

"Look what he's done to us."

Her voice was soft and low.

Hermione's breath let out in a quiet, unrestrained gasp.

She had expected to hear herself speak, but it still startled her.

"You know, then," she asked herself. "Everything."

Her not-quite reflection nodded.

"I can feel what you feel," she said. "Sadness. Anger. Desperation. I see it in your eyes. That's enough."

Hermione nodded.

"What will we do?" the painted version of herself asked.

"He's making an effort to be better," Hermione began slowly. "To make us happy."

She looked herself in the eye.

"Is it enough?"

The painted Hermione let her hand slide down and off the surface of the canvas. Hermione also lowered her arm.

"He does it because he's afraid of you leaving. He still says he isn't sorry for how this all started."

"He needs to learn his lesson," Hermione agreed, gooseflesh rising up all along her arms.

"He must suffer."

"He will," Hermione promised. "He thinks he can brush over our past so easily. Like all of that pain never mattered. I *refuse* to forget."

"Do you love him?" she asked herself.

Hermione hesitated.

"I can't tell *what* I feel," she admitted bleakly. "The anger will never fade. It warps everything else."

She nodded.

"I'm sorry."

"I don't think it's really love," Hermione said, frowning, trying to gauge the depths of her feelings for Draco. "Everything is so conflicted..."

Her likeness said nothing, waiting for her to formulate her response.

"I care for him in the way a caged animal at the zoo cares for its only other companion," Hermione finally said. "Lonely, pained, bored—you grow accustomed to the only other presence there. Even if you don't fully like them. I have Lucio and Pansy, and even George and Neville and Luna, but they'll never truly understand. Who can understand a monster better than another monster?"

"That was what he wanted," her likeness pointed out. "To wear you down year after year. To soften the bluntest edges of your hatred."

"Well, it worked," Hermione replied flatly. "But I've softened the hardest edges of his, too. I flatter and play to his wants. He doesn't beat me anymore. I won my magic back. I can leave the manor whenever I want."

"But not permanently. If you're gone longer than he agrees to, he'll come for you."

"Not yet," Hermione said. "We'll reach an agreement. I know we will."

"And if he takes back his word, and chains you up again?"

Hermione didn't like to dwell on that scenario.

"He's made Vows," she said. "I don't see him breaking them unless he's truly desperate. If he tries it, he'll be sorry."

Her likeness nodded.

"What should I do?" she asked. "I assume I'm a part of your grand plan, otherwise you wouldn't have had me animated in secret."

"Don't speak to anyone else but me," Hermione said to her. "Not even to Martin, unless I'm there with him. Don't let anyone see or hear you move. When anyone else is around, remain as still as you were before the enchantment. Draco can't know you're conscious. Not until it's time."

The excitement of another piece of her plan coming together rushed into her blood. Pansy, Lucio, and Neville and Luna were off somewhere, occupied in their own duties. Draco was still gone. She had the day to herself. Hermione sought Martin at once, streaking through the corridors on bare feet, her skirts billowing behind her.

At this rate, Lucio's portrait would take much longer than hers or Draco's had. She didn't care, even if it put Martin at greater risk. She found Martin, freshly arrived into the manor,

barely setting up his things. There was no time to tell him they had as much time as they wanted. Hermione took his arm, dragged him behind some bookshelves and pushed him up against them, her breaths heavy and hot, her body burning for attention.

Martin carried her to the chaise, settling atop her, his hands admiring her form. Hermione wiggled out of her gown and wrapped her legs around him, let his mouth taste her flushed skin.

Martin held her thigh up around him and lifted her, his movements surer than they'd been on the last occasion. They were lying on their sides now. Her back was flush against him, grinding her ass on his length. His fingers shook with urgent want as he gently pushed her hair out of his face, trailed that hand down to stroke her all over. She ground against him again, sighing softly, her own hand darting between them to cup him in her hand and trace the shape of him with her fingertips. Martin groaned and she turned her head to him, let him grasp the side of her throat and press a kiss to her lips.

When he entered her she gave a loud moan. She took his free hand and pressed it to her mouth—he held it there, understanding her meaning. Being inside her was like being in a fantasy—never had he imagined they would become true. But her hair on his skin was real, the pressure of her body against his was real, her heat wrapped around him was most decidedly real. He felt a little numb with disbelief but it was wearing off, being chased away by pleasure as she clenched around him. Her free hand reached up to grasp at his shoulder, urging him to move, her nails digging into his skin. Her tongue darted out to lick at his palm, still covering her mouth. Martin felt himself throb in response.

The Dark Lord was a vile, fearsome man. But a lucky one, above all.

[A FEW DAYS LATER.]

Hermione climbed off Draco, sweat trickling down her back and temples. A welcome blast of cool air from the open window met her naked skin and she sighed, trying to regulate her breathing.

Draco, still lying on the bed where he'd just been underneath her, gasping and cursing through his release, was sitting up.

He reached for her before Hermione could leave the bed, pulling her face to his for a bruising kiss.

"Incredible, firebird," he panted when they pulled apart. "You milked me dry."

She smiled, her face shining with sweat. "Was that not the point?"

He pushed her down onto her back, his hand probing at her red and swollen lips. She was sticky with arousal and his seed. It leaked from her in a thick stream.

Hermione could see a near manic glint in his eye. He carefully pushed his fingers into her, thrusting slowly as if he was trying to push his semen further inside her. It didn't hurt, but she was so sensitive from the sex that she bit her lip and shivered.

“Draco,” she said, placing her hand on his cheek. “If it hasn’t happened yet, maybe it’s a sign I was right. Maybe I can’t have another child. We should just accept it and move on.”

“We’ve only been trying a short while,” he replied. “I won’t concede until we’ve been trying for over a year. I won’t stop until I get what I want.”

“Lucio should be enough for you,” she said, frowning. “He’s a perfect son. You’re so focused on wanting more than one that you can’t be happy with what you have.”

“I never said he wasn’t enough,” he said, pausing.

“You act like it,” Hermione replied.

He withdrew his hand from her.

“If Lucio can’t have siblings, that’s sad, yes,” Hermione continued slowly. “But it isn’t the end of the world, Draco. For him *or* for you. He still has his parents. We’re still a family.”

He nodded, but she could see in his eyes that he refused to admit defeat.

“I’m tired,” she said, and smiled. “Run the bath for us?”

He obeyed at once, and in the ten-second span that he was gone, Hermione raced to perform a quick contraception charm. She wasn’t able to use it after every time they had sex, but each opportunity that presented itself had to be seized. She felt the strange warmth settle over her womb and then dissipate.

Draco emerged from the bathroom a second later, coming over to lift her from the bed, cradling her close to his chest.

Hot water ran pleasantly and began to fill up the tub, steaming up the bathroom nicely. Draco carried her in, stepping into the hot water without hissing even once. He sat her on his lap and let her rest against him. They stayed seated that way for a minute in the steam.

Until he opened his mouth.

“I never thought I would envy the Weasleys,” he murmured.

Hermione stirred, having immediately begun to drowse off.

“How?” she asked, frowning.

“There were so many of them,” he said. “A whole, huge family. I may have detested them but they had that, at least. How is it that idiotic man and his wife could spawn that many children so easily?”

“Draco, I’m tired of talking about this,” she warned. “Let it go, or I’ll kick you out.”

He sighed.

“Very well,” he said, and Hermione suspected he was pouting though she couldn’t see his face. He raised his hands to her shoulders and began to massage them.

Pleased, Hermione let him, closing her eyes, warmed quite thoroughly as the hot bathwater continued to rise, now reaching her knees. His strong hands continued to knead at her flesh, digging into her muscles.

“What—” he began, probably intending to ask a question, but Hermione cut him off.

“Shh,” she said, not opening her eyes. “There’s no need to talk right now. Enjoy the silence with me.”

He obeyed and shut his mouth, pressing a kiss to the top of her head and then continued massaging her until Hermione began to drift off in the tub in a haze of relaxation.

Well—to Draco, it appeared that way. Inwardly, Hermione had been struck by an idea so daring and tenuous that it would have kept her from sleeping if she even had an orchestra to serenade her at the side of the tub. Draco couldn’t see her face since he sat behind her, allowing her to lean backward onto him, but she kept her eyes closed anyway, thinking hard all the while, careful to keep her body languid as he moved from her shoulders to her upper back.

She didn’t know why the idea hadn’t come to her before. Perhaps because it was so risky, but at this point it was worth a try... *especially* considering how desperate he was becoming. He would have no reason to question her, she hoped.

For the plan to work, she had to wait until the following month, carefully keeping track of when she should expect her period. It was a constant state of anxiety for her, wondering if it would arrive—she’d spent so long on contraceptives in one form or another that it had messed with the schedule, after all—but if Erik had said nothing was amiss then she would have to rely on that. When the week approached she made an effort to wake up earlier than Draco each morning, taking care not to wake him as she assessed herself for blood.

It arrived, to her relief—she went into the bathroom and tidied herself up. Draco slept on, unaware. In secret, she applied the charms over herself that Pansy had taught her, ones that helped reduce the flow or mask it all together, so that while Draco couldn’t see, smell or taste it, she could.

She would insist on oral sex whenever Draco wanted to have sex that week, and if things changed and he wanted more than that, she would have to rely on the charms, that they would work in her favor. According to Pansy, she might feel wetter than normal to him, but he wouldn’t be able to tell that she was on her period.

The first day passed with Hermione holding her breath every time Draco touched her. The charms held up well—but had to be applied daily. They were still having sex daily, and she was still seeing Martin and sometimes Nott—not one of the three seemed to notice was wrong.

Now that she was confident she could take the next step in her sudden (and perhaps reckless) plan, Hermione went to Pansy, pulling her from the library so they could go for a cold winter walk that afternoon.

“It’s working,” she said in a hushed tone although by then they were far enough to not be overheard by anybody.

Pansy smiled. “That’s great news. I was nervous, too.”

“I want you to message Erik,” Hermione ordered. “As discreetly as you can. Tell him I need an evaluation, and to not tell Draco. Have him come as soon as possible.”

[ONE DAY LATER.]

Hermione was pacing around in the nursery as Lucio scribbled away at his desk. He'd finished his maths assignment without trouble, eager to get a new book he'd picked out from the library.

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in," Hermione called, and Pansy entered.

"My Lady," Pansy said curtsying before she came over to her. "Erik is here."

"Good," Hermione said. "Send him to the bedroom at once, please. Where is Draco?"

"In his study."

"Do as best as you can not to let him interfere."

Pansy nodded and left.

Lucio had noticed their hushed conversation and was watching from over the top of his book.

"What is it, mummy?"

Hermione smiled automatically. "Nothing, dearest. I'll be right back. Pansy will watch over you until then."

"Okay," he said, distracted, already reading again.

Healer Erik stood in the bedroom, his back to the door, admiring the stained-glass window by the bed. His grey robes were marked on the shoulders with red detailing—standard dress for a Healer. He turned when Hermione entered and bowed deeply.

"My Lady," he greeted, smiling. "It is good to see you."

"And you, Erik," Hermione said, and gestured to the window. "You like it?"

"I have always been impressed by it," he admitted. "It's exquisite work."

Hermione smiled. "There are multiple around the manor. It started with one, in our first home. Draco had it made for me. It was a copy of a favorite window of mine from Hogwarts. He's built up a small collection of new ones since then."

Erik raised his brows, impressed.

"He is a very devoted man to remember such a detail."

The only reason he knew that and remembered it is because he stalked me, Hermione wanted to add, but merely gave him a vague smile.

"Yes, I'm very lucky."

You've known all this time the circumstances of our marriage. Even well before Draco put you under his control, you knew and did nothing. You accepted it. You take his money and obey his orders. You've seen what he does to me before he put you under his control, and you never raised an alarm.

He had always been kind to her, regardless. Perhaps *professional* was the more correct term. But Imperius Curse or not, he was still an accomplice, and Hermione could never forget it. And that would make what she had to do now easier.

She opened her mouth to speak, but was cut off by another voice in the doorway.

"What is this?" came Draco's voice from the door.

Hermione turned, feigning surprise. Erik and bowed to Draco.

"My Lord."

Draco was in the doorway leaning against the frame, his arms crossed, his eyes cool.

"Is something the matter?" He was staring at Hermione.

"No, my Lord," Hermione said quickly. "I've been feeling a little off for the past week—I only summoned Erik to make sure nothing is wrong."

Draco's eyes went from Erik to Hermione, assessing them both. Hermione stared back, undaunted, but made sure to take her hands away from her stomach.

His eyes lingered there for a moment until he finally spoke.

"Proceed, then. Erik, I would see you in my study once you're finished here."

"Of course, my Lord."

Draco stepped away from the door frame, coming closer to the bed. Hermione tried to give him a reassuring smile.

"I hope you're alright, my love," he said.

"I'm sure I am," she said. "I just wanted to check on something."

"I look forward to hearing about it," Draco said. His stare lingered on her, and then he left. The door closed behind him with a gentle click.

Hermione exhaled a little shakily once the door had closed behind him.

Erik had reached back into his kit.

"I must admit it is a happy occurrence, my Lady, when *you* call me instead of your husband."

"I agree," Hermione said. "I fear the number of visits you have conducted here with me unconscious has been too many to count. I always prefer these occasions when I can speak, and know what is happening."

"Indeed," he said, standing. He held his hands behind his back. "Now may I ask why you summoned me? You mentioned feeling off just now. Please describe what happens, and if you have other symptoms."

Hermione nodded, acting as though she were about to begin explaining. Erik was entirely unguarded—after years of tending to her and seeing how helpless she was, she supposed he was still unused to the possibility of her being a threat.

She might have her magic back but he still operating on the notion that Draco was the one fully in control, that she was voiceless and chained.

No longer.

“Imperio.”

He went still, his hands dropping to his sides. He stared at her with a pleasant, calm expression.

“You will perform a routine inspection,” Hermione instructed, standing from the bed, “And you will act as though nothing is amiss when you go to Draco. Right now, though, we’ll conduct a pregnancy test. I expect it to come out negative. If it isn’t... I’ll figure out what to do next. But if the test is negative, then when you go to see my husband you will tell him I swore you to secrecy—and you will lead him to believe that I *am* pregnant, and you will leave and keep up the lie as best as you can and *never* tell my husband the truth, even if he commands you to. Do you understand?”

“Yes, my Lady,” Erik said. His voice was a little distant, his eyes glazed over. “I understand.”

“Good,” Hermione said. “Now let us begin.”

Some magical practices didn’t differ that much from the Muggle equivalent. Hermione provided the urine sample, let Erik take it and mix a powder from a pouch he’d brought in his kit into it and swirl it around. He inspected it for a moment as she stood there waiting, tense as a tree bough about to break.

“Well?” she finally asked.

He looked at her and shook his head, and she went weak with relief.

Draco poured Erik some whiskey from behind his desk, and gestured for the Healer to sit.

His own evaluation had been quick and painless, the results proving nothing out of the ordinary, and that his sperm count was normal. Considering he and Hermione were actively trying to conceive again, that particular bit of news seemed worthy of a celebratory drink.

“Is something the matter with my wife?” he asked bluntly.

“Nothing serious, my Lord,” Erik said, shifting in his seat. He accepted the drink gratefully. “She complains of fatigue and nausea, but I gave her some tonics to aid her ailments. She is otherwise perfectly healthy and seems to have recovered from the sleeping spell very well. There is nothing severe to worry about for now.”

“Good,” Draco said, relieved. “And she didn’t mention *anything* else?”

“Nothing aside from the symptoms I just mentioned, my Lord.”

Draco nodded, satisfied.

“To you and your family, my Lord,” Erik said, raising his glass.

Draco raised his glass in acknowledgment. They both drank.

Draco finished his in one go. Erik had only taken half.

Draco gave Erik a pointed look.

“And is there any chance these symptoms she mentioned are the result of an underlying condition?”

“Now, my Lady swore me to secrecy,” Erik said, looking a little apprehensive. “She wants to keep the news to herself out of caution, but... I believe this condition would have quite the opposite effect on you, in fact.”

Draco smiled broadly, at once guessing what this news was. A weight had lifted from his shoulders. Erik downed the rest of his drink politely, trying to hide his smile behind his glass.

“I see,” he said.

Draco leaned back, tapped his glass to refill it, and drank it all in another go. Once, when he’d been fully human, the drink would have had his head spinning a little already. Since the Horcrux, he’d found lots of things affected him a lot less than they used to, and drink was one of them. He might need a barrel’s worth to feel even a little unsteady, at this point.

“I believe Lady Hermione is still afraid something may go wrong,” Erik said. “I’ve done my best to assure her she is in great health. If I may ask—why do you think she fears another pregnancy, my Lord? Is it because of the Horcrux?”

Draco thought of her Horcrux, sitting in the dark. A treasure so vile and yet so precious, he’d hidden it and protected it as thoroughly as he could.

He’d wanted to put it alongside his own Horcrux. Had nearly caved in to that desire. But resisted—should she ever find it, it would be too convenient to find both cursed items there and destroy them possibly in the same stroke. He would not taunt irony, and so he’d placed them apart from each other, hoping that one day he could bring them together.

Erik still waited for an answer. Draco stood.

“This was a happy visit, then,” he said, ignoring the question. “Thank you for your services. I expect we’ll be seeing you often in the weeks to come if this is the case.”

“Yes, I suppose you shall,” Erik said. “If Lady Hermione experiences new symptoms outside of the usual, please summon me at once. We must be prepared for any risks that might arise.”

Draco nodded, thinking gravely of how the Horcrux might have complicated matters, if at all. Would it not have strengthened his wife’s body as it had strengthened his?

“I take my duties as a husband seriously,” he said, secretly troubled. “I’ll make sure my wife is tended to at every moment. No danger will cross our path, I’m sure of it. I won’t have

this go wrong.”

“I believe you, my Lord.” Erik stood and bowed. “I will probably return in a fortnight to see how her condition has progressed, unless I’m called for before then.”

“Very well,” Draco said, nodding, turning to face the window behind his desk.

The door shut behind Erik. Draco poured himself another drink.

He sipped at it slowly, savoring its richness. Victory rang inside him like church bells.

At last.

So sweet of her to try to keep it from him. Perhaps it was out of fear, but he chose to view it as the opposite. She wanted to surprise him. And it was only natural to not want to break the news yet. The poor thing was still terrified of the lasting effects of the Horcrux and his ring. Well, he would ease those fears as best as he could. This pregnancy would come to term without a single hindrance if he could help it.

The finished paintings had been placed into a separate room, as Martin’s station in the library was becoming quite crowded with those massive paintings surrounding him.

Draco went to it now, the corridors empty as he passed through them.

The paintings were each one set up to lean against some armchairs by the inactive fireplace.

He uncovered his own first, not knowing which was which.

It’s a shame I didn’t have these made before, he thought. *It would’ve been interesting to try and make Horcruxes out of these.*

He still could. Who could stop him? But it was too obvious a decision to make, and Hermione wouldn’t hesitate to destroy the pair if she suspected.

Besides—these are to be displayed prominently, not to be shuttered and locked away. It would be a waste to hide such craftsmanship.

Except—he pulled the sheet off his wife’s portrait, his breath automatically catching in his chest as she was revealed.

He would have another made of her—one for his own personal use, one much more titillating. It would go in his office, somewhere secret, where only he could gaze at her any time he wanted.

That one would be animated, too.

The excitement borne from Erik’s news had yet to leave his system. Draco summoned another armchair and placed it before his wife’s portrait.

Hermione would be with Lucio or Pansy now. If she had tried to keep it a secret from him then she likely had not told either of them yet, he supposed.

He wanted to rush to her, ask her to confirm it, to envelope her in his arms and lift her off her feet. The urge was strong but he held back, knowing he would give himself away if he did that.

I'll play along, firebird, he thought to himself. For now. You can't expect me to contain myself for too long over something so momentous.

His gaze was heavy on the portrait, tracing each fine curve of his wife's body, the lush bow of her lips. Her arms were pressed together so firmly from her position on the chaise that her breasts jutted out like ripe melons begging for a taste. Draco leaned back so he could unzip his trousers and pull out his growing erection, heavy and hot in his hand, pulsing with need.

He began to stroke, breathing shallow breaths, biting his lip. He was so excited he was halfway there already, his whole body strung tight with the need for release.

Hermione's eyes were still guarded in her portrait. Her mouth was so serious. It would not do. Once the portraits were animated, he would take it upon himself to speak to each iteration of her and teach her to smile and tease and preen just for him. He would teach her to slide her skirt higher, to finger herself and moan his name when he was the only one in the room.

Nothing could compare to the real Hermione, of course—a painting, no matter how beautiful, could not suck him off or curl up in his arms. But it was a strange, sensual thrill to have a copy of his wife and be able to keep her to himself without repercussion. Draco moved his grip nearer to his tip, giving fast, shallow strokes, teasing the glans. Precum leaked in a steady dribble from his tip and he used it to lubricate himself, moaning as he imagined his wife underneath him.

And he had no doubt the painted iterations of himself would be in her painting more than his own. He smiled wickedly at the thought, pleasure spiking sharply in him, pushing him to climax suddenly. His body went stiff and he thrust into his hand, seeking to stoke the fire burning at him.

“Haaah—” he groaned, his eyes finally shutting as he ejaculated—rope after rope. He heard the distinct sound of it landing atop the canvas but made no move to aim elsewhere.

With his eyes closed, he couldn't see the painted Hermione move. The beauty of her portrait was now desecrated by his ejaculate, but underneath that she had awakened, fury in her now-scarlet eyes, as she tried to claw at him through a barrier she couldn't penetrate.

Bliss overtook him, rolling over him in strong waves until he finished and opened his eyes, his hand shaking a little. Everything was still. Hermione's eyes were dark brown and serious, staring into him.

The painting was covered in cum, staining the skirt of her green gown, painted so brilliantly he felt he could reach out and graze a finger against that silk. Draco relished the sight for a moment and then magicked it away.

He left the room soon after, intending to find the flesh and blood version of his wife.

At dinner, Draco was caring and attentive, in good spirits. Hermione watched him carefully. He engaged with Lucio and asked him about that day's lessons. Lucio was glowing with happiness and reported dutifully everything that had happened and how excited he was to see his playmates the following day.

Draco slid his eyes over to Hermione, who was smiling lovingly at her son.

“And how was your day, my Lady? I didn’t see you as much as I wanted.”

Hermione set her fork down.

“Well as you know, I had Healer Erik come just for a quick inspection—”

Lucio turned to her, alarmed. “Are you ill, mummy?”

“No, darling,” she said, taking his cheek in her palm. “I was feeling a little ill but I’m fine now, I promise.”

Draco leaned forward. “And what did he say it was?”

“He said my irons levels are quite low,” Hermione said convincingly. “And that was why I was feeling dizzy and tired. Nothing serious.”

Draco wanted to toy with her a little, make her sweat. He had the mind to ask her more pressing questions when Neville entered the room, distracting them all.

“You are interrupting our meal, Longbottom,” he said.

“Forgive me, my Lord,” Neville said after a stiff bow. “Theodore Nott has come to speak with you.”

Normally, Draco would have ordered Neville to direct Nott to wait until they were finished, as he hadn’t expected Nott to call.

But if he’d come suddenly then there must be something important to relay.

Draco stood, sighing. “Duty calls.”

“Will you be going anywhere?” Hermione asked, trying not to sound too hopeful. The candles on the table flickered as Draco moved swiftly to Lucio and pressed a kiss atop his head.

“Not tonight,” Draco said. He rushed to her next, kissed her hungrily.

“I’m glad you’re well, firebird,” he murmured. “I worried there might be an issue since Erik was just here recently.”

“I’m just being careful,” she said, blushing under the weight of his affections.

He kissed her again. “You made the right call.”

“Ewww,” Lucio giggled, covering his eyes.

“Hush, you,” Draco said when they broke apart. Hermione exhaled, wiped at the edge of her mouth. “True love is not to be laughed at.”

Lucio looked at his mother, who was slightly leaning away from his father, her posture too rigid to be comfortable. She looked like she was concentrating very hard to not laugh.

She caught him looking and nodded, her expression falling carefully blank again, and he understood her meaning.

Play along. Don’t anger him.

“Yes, Father.”

Draco stole another rough kiss from Hermione, then looked back at his son.

“One day, you’ll understand.”

Then he was gone.

“You’d better have a good reason from pulling me away from my wife and son,” Draco said to Nott from where he stood on the dais before his throne.

A few feet below him, Nott inclined his head quickly.

“My Lord,” he said, “I’ve found someone who could be of interest to you. Regarding your interest in enchanting paintings. You mentioned not being able to find useful information for what you wanted.”

“So I did,” Draco said. “Tell me what you have.”

Draco returned to the bedroom an hour later. Nott had already gone, almost reluctantly, hoping to catch a glimpse of Lady Malfoy or have her steal him away for her needs. But Lord Malfoy had concluded their meeting and dismissed him curtly, had Longbottom (now without his disguise and staring at him coolly from the corridor) see him to the Apparition point by the front door.

Hermione was waiting on the bed. He was already stripping off his clothes, tossing them carelessly to the floor, where they vanished an instant later, sent off to be washed. Currents of excitement ran through his body, flaring as his gaze connected with his wife’s.

“I thought you would be asleep,” he said.

Hermione shrugged one shoulder, her loose, heavy hair falling over it.

“I waited for you.”

Draco hurried his efforts to undress, desperate to reach her.

She had put on a short nightdress—an older one he insisted on keeping, as it was a particular favorite of his. Black and frothing with frills and lace, short enough to tease and scandalize in certain positions, but long enough to hide what he sought now.

He was nude now, his erection pointing at her. Draco ignored it, went to her, took her face in his hands. He kissed her slowly, marking her with his tongue. She clung to him—let him ravish her mouth.

“Is there something you want to tell me?” he asked, pulling away.

Her lips glistened. Her eyes were suddenly vulnerable as she looked up at him. She was trying not to hold her stomach. Draco felt his heart lift.

“I love you, Draco.”

No sooner had the words sunk in than he was gripped with a new energy that doubled his lust. He pushed her down immediately, nuzzling and kissing her throat as she gripped his shoulders and moaned.

"I love you too," he panted, grinding his cock against her core. She was so wet already. His head spun with want, with elation over her words. His hips burned to drive forward and fill her cunt, but he stopped himself, staring deep into her glittering mahogany eyes. "So much that it kills me."

[A FEW DAYS LATER]

A week or so later, Draco awoke Hermione gently, pulling her from a vague but happy dream. She sat up, wincing a little at the sunlight coming in from the windows, and looked at him questioningly.

"I have a surprise for you," he said, holding his hand out to her. "Come with me."

She took his hand and followed him down to the foyer, stumbling a little over her own feet. The second time it happened, Draco pulled her close and lifted her into his arms, kissed her forehead.

"I just want you to see this," he said, "and then you can go back to sleep, sweetling. I'm sorry. I couldn't wait any longer."

She was hardly even paying attention to their surroundings, still half-asleep, but nodded.

They had reached the first painting. Draco set Hermione down onto her feet.

"Take a look."

Hermione had caught sight of it, and studied it briefly, then looked at him, as if to say '*it's a painting, so?*'. But something else distracted her and he watched with mounting anticipation as Hermione took in the newly decorated foyer, all the artwork displayed within.

"When did you have the time to do this?" she asked, stunned.

"You approve?"

She nodded, her eyes widening at a tall marble statue off to the left of the staircase.

"When?" she asked again. "And *why?*"

Draco shrugged one shoulder, secretly preening.

"It came to me in a mad fancy. I did it for you."

"I never cared about how the place looks," she admitted. "But it looks beautiful, Draco."

"This isn't all of it," he said, walking up to her, taking her hands in his. "There's artwork enough to line every corridor and room. I won't make you look at it all now, but my personal favorites are in the library."

He led her there. It was empty—too early in the morning for Martin to arrive yet, and he preferred it that way. The drapes were already drawn and the day outside was bright and no

clouds littered the winter sky—a good omen. The library’s stately opulence was already on full display, benevolently lit by the morning light.

Bernini’s masterpieces commanded the attention of the entire room, an ethereal glow to their marble skin. Hermione gasped when she saw it.

They were tall, massive statues. He led Hermione right to them, so that she could gaze at their beauty.

“Draco...” she said, her eyes huge and round. Her hand gripped his arm. “Tell me these are copies.”

“Copies aren’t good enough for us,” he said, repelled at the thought of a cheap substitute. “Only the real thing will do for my wife.”

At that, she staggered a little, holding onto him tight. Draco supported her smugly.

“Don’t you like them?” he asked.

She looked at him, carefully picking her words.

“They’re *beautiful*, Draco. They’re incredible. But—these don’t belong here.”

“Yes, they do,” he said arrogant as ever. “They’re far more suited in our home than in some stuffy, over decorated and overcrowded gallery. Here, you can truly appreciate them without being distracted by the thirty other artworks in the room.”

She glanced at Apollo and Daphne and then back at Hades and Persephone.

“Quite accurate,” he said to her, leaning down to press a kiss to her cheek. “My poor little wife—you had the same look she does on your face every time I touched you. See how desperately she tries to twist away? You fought me with every fiber of your being. An admirable effort. But look at how large he is in comparison, how strong.”

He was behind her, pressed against her. His words were a seductive balm to her ears, and his hands were slowly crawling along her form, touching her, mirroring the placement of Hades’ hands on Persephone’s body.

“See how resolute he looks,” he murmured into her ear. “The way his fingers dig into her thighs. What horrible passion. They are lost to each other, frozen for eternity like this.”

He raised his hand to cup her throat, pull her into him. The other gripped her waist possessively. Hermione fought to stay perfectly still. His warm breath rolled over her, his nose nuzzled against her ear. She couldn’t stop staring at the sculpture, at poor Persephone, terrified and damned and *taken*.

Every story I’ve heard about you never mentions your rage, she thought to her, silently willing her to answer. *They tell of your mother’s grief or your own—how she caused devastation to the mortals because she couldn’t find her daughter. They tell of Hades and Zeus arranging your fate and never asking your thoughts or feelings.*

But I’ve never heard a tale of what you felt. They say you gave in, that you ate the pomegranate seeds. They never talk of your rage. Of your pain. They skip from point A to

point C, when you are queen and presumably happy. They never give a second thought to the fact that you never wanted this, and you still may not have wanted it, even after you gave in.

If there was no mention of Persephone's vengeance, well—she would be the first to write it, and it would be written in blood.

31. Pas de deux

She summoned Nott the following morning after breakfast, and made sure Draco was aware of it. There was an edge to his gaze as he looked at her but took her hand and kissed it before leaving.

Ever punctual, Nott arrived quickly. Pansy escorted him into the same spare room they usually used. When Hermione had entered the room some ten minutes later, he sank to his knee in reverence.

Hermione fed from him and let him pleasure her, but made no effort to return the favor. He was merely a pawn, and she need not exert too much effort, after all. He didn't seem to mind, either, as he was totally engrossed in her pleasure over his own.

When she had been sufficiently satisfied, she arranged herself on the couch so that he could stand behind her and massage her shoulders.

"Is this acceptable, my Lady?" he asked.

She nodded her assent, sighing.

"Why did you come last night?" she asked, leaning back against the couch her eyes closed. His hands worked steadily at her shoulders. "What business does Draco have with you?"

His hands slowed a fraction.

"I'm not free to say, my Lady," Nott responded. "Forgive me. I'm under the strictest orders not to share that with anyone else."

"I command you to tell me."

Nott shook his head. "Forgive me, my Lady. I can't. My Lord suspected you would ask—even if I wanted to tell you I couldn't. I don't want to displease you but I can't reject his order. I'll accept punishment for not being able to follow your order."

"It isn't your failing," she said. "But my husband's. He asks me not to keep secrets and then pulls this."

Not like she wasn't harboring secrets of her own. But it hardly mattered. All it did was point to the fact she knew very well.

This is why our marriage will never work. There will always be secrets between us.

She suspected she knew the reason for Nott's late night visit, anyway. It must have had to do with Draco's intention for the portrait. He had been quiet for weeks and she'd felt his dissatisfaction, leading her to think he'd come nowhere with his attempts.

But if Nott had come unexpectedly the night before... the must have been a sudden jump forward. How big was it? Was Draco's plan able to come to fruition? Or would he hit another wall?

The news troubled Hermione, but not too badly. She'd been working hard, too.

"Thank you, my Lady," Nott said.

Hermione didn't reply, thinking hard.

Draco had bought into her lie. Now came the hard part—maintaining it.

After Erik's visit and her talk with Draco, Hermione had confided the news to Pansy, and communicated with a look and a tiny shake of her head that it was a lie so no words needed to be said. Pansy had understood at once, her grim expression melting into one of utmost relief after. Little else was said aloud—they knew it was important to sell the lie to the Dark Lord as best as they could.

This had to be the final piece of her plan. Faking a pregnancy gave her a small window of time that she could finalize her preparations before eventually the lie became obvious. Of course, she could always fake a miscarriage as a last resort if things went wrong or felt she needed more time. But the hourglass was relentless and moving still—at some point, she *had* to act.

Could she do it now, if she had to? Perhaps. She felt confident about her abilities by now—could fly capably (though it was quite difficult when it was snowing) for an hour and probably longer, could fell the heaviest trees with her power.

How does any of that stand up to the might of my husband?

She would have to find out.

[LATER THAT EVENING]

Draco wanted her to walk with him that evening around the manor, so that she could appreciate the rest of the new decor.

He found his wife in the sitting room, curled up with a blanket in her lap.

"Are you well, Hermione?" he asked, sitting with her, feeling her forehead. She seemed a little drowsy and her forehead felt warm but not feverish.

She leaned into the cool touch of his hand.

"A headache," she murmured. "That's all."

"You didn't tell Pansy?" he asked. "She would have brought you a potion at once."

"Don't lecture me," Hermione said, but there was no sharpness in her tone. "I thought taking a nap would help."

"Let's go to the bedroom, then," he said, picking her up and off the couch before she could reply. The blanket slid from her lap to the floor. He held her against his chest carefully.

"You're sure you're well," he said, already moving toward the stairs. She nodded, her eyes half-closed.

"There's nothing you're hiding from me?"

She went a little pink. Draco was already striding into the bedroom and deposited her onto the bed, crouching on the ground by her feet to help her out of her shoes.

She said nothing, watching him in the dim firelight of the room.

Holding her feet in his hand, Draco massaged them gently for a moment, first one and then the other, then raised each to his mouth to kiss it.

"You promised there would be no lies between us," he breathed. "You can tell me anything, sweetling. We'll deal with it together. Nothing you could ever do could kill my love for you. Trust in me."

She hesitated, but gave in.

"I'm pregnant, Draco."

To hear it from her lips was such a relief. Draco smiled, kissed her foot again.

"You knew," she said.

"I suspected," he said. "I was worried about you and I made Erik tell me. He hinted at it, so he didn't give you away entirely. But I was waiting to hear it from you. I'm so glad, sweetling. So glad."

"I am, too," she said. "Just... nervous."

"How is your head?" he asked, remembering her headache. "Shall I call for Pansy?"

"No," she said. "I feel much better now."

Draco leaned forward to hold her face in his hands, staring deep into her eyes, trying to see if any resentment or despair hid somewhere there.

Instead, he found devotion. It knocked the breath from him.

"I love you, Draco," she said, her voice wavering.

Draco kissed her tenderly.

"I love you too, firebird," he said, and kissed each corner of her mouth, then her forehead. "Now our little family continues to grow."

"Lucio will be so happy," she said, smiling.

"We must make an announcement," he said, his thoughts racing ahead. "We'll send word to the *Prophet*, and have some photographs taken. We'll—"

Hermione's hand covered his mouth, her fingertips pressing onto his lips, silencing him.

He looked at her curiously.

"No, Draco," she said firmly. "It's too soon now. Let's keep it a surprise and reveal it later—when *I'm* ready."

Draco stared at her hard, again trying to find any hint of malice in her countenance, but she stared back earnestly, resolution in her eyes, signaling that she would not back down if he argued with her.

To keep the news private for any length of time was a displeasing notion, but here he supposed he had to bow. She was right, after all—say there was trouble in the coming weeks, and the fetus ripped away from them? She had looked so happy before—he couldn’t imagine what pain it might give her to mourn a child lost so soon. And if it would help strengthen her trust in him, then there was only one thing left to do.

Grit your teeth and bear it. For her sake.

She pulled her hand away from his mouth, seeing the agreement in his eyes. Draco pressed her down onto the bed, kissing her anywhere he could reach. She was liquid in his arms, so relaxed and pliant as he unfurled her beneath him.

Her skin was soft, warm silk—he touched his hands to her stomach reverently, remembering how it had grown during her first pregnancy. He had loved to stroke and hold it as she slept, to feel his legacy grow inside her with each passing month. It had been strange and exciting to witness, to shepherd his radiant wife through it all. Now, he got to live through that blessing again.

It will be different this time. Months of joy await us, sweetling.

He kissed her stomach—her hands were on him, encouraging him, holding him closer.

“As my Lady commands,” he breathed into her skin. “I obey.”

She went outside the next morning after breakfast, hand in hand with Lucio for a short reprieve of their daily schedules. Lucio was only too glad to have his lessons start later than usual, so he went with her eagerly and played in the snow.

Hermione had told Pansy to stay behind, that she could spend the rest of her afternoon as she wished. Neville and Luna were occupied tending to Draco, likely stationed outside his office in silent misery. Hermione wondered if she could pry them away from Draco’s grasp—but it was too soon. They were nothing but shiny new toys to him to gloat over and pose them how he wished, exerting his will over them like they were without sentence.

At least Neville had behaved himself since landing here. Hermione hadn’t known what to expect, if he would rage against Draco with every breath he took or if he would accept his fate. Truly, he seemed somewhere in the middle, for as much as he readily obeyed Draco’s commands, she still sensed the air of resentment and anger around him sometimes. It was *such* a relief to see that sort of demeanor reflected in anyone outside of herself. She had known that misery for much too long, and though it was hidden now she felt doubly glad to see that anger in Neville’s clenched jaw, as it validated her own.

Whenever their gazes met Neville was always the first to look away, his expression carefully guarded and still. Hermione kept hers the same, not wanting to acknowledge her discomfort each time it happened.

It was inevitable—they’d been very close, once. It was difficult to forget the days they’d spent working together as Head students at Hogwarts or all the misadventures of the years prior to that. It was the same with Luna. Hermione hated that these memories cropped up

unbidden each time she looked at them. They would do her no favors here, those old sentiments.

We're in the same house, the same room, but on the edges of two different cliffs. Those are someone else's memories, now.

Sentiment and old memories would only make the task of killing them more difficult.

Draco would probably want her to draw it out, to make a spectacle. That was why he'd saved them this long, after all, wasn't it? So he could gather his followers round and have them watch as he finalized his triumph, and humiliate Neville and Luna in the process.

He'd had victories enough. She was owed one this time, was she not? Hermione resolved not to let him have his way in that regard. She wanted it over and done with as quickly as possible, and if he disagreed then she would bat her eyes and distract him in the best way she knew how.

She and Lucio had gone to the kitchen for a quick snack before coming outside. Hermione, usually not one to eat in excess, had taken an extra helping of what remained from that day's breakfast and ate it quickly. Though she might not be pregnant she had to give the appearance of it some way or another. Casting an illusion charm over her stomach might work to convince passerby, but not her husband—especially not with that appetite of his, and those hands that seemed drawn like magnets to her body. He would be able to feel the difference at once. So she ignored the fact that she was not hungry and ate until her plate was clear, hoping that a little extra weight would be convincing enough.

"Mummy, look," Lucio called, pulling Hermione from her thoughts.

He was pointing at the pond—the water was half frozen over, and tall crystals of ice were still forming slowly where the water was barely beginning to solidify. It was a beautiful, strange sight.

"Can I go look at it?" he asked. He held a snowball in one hand.

"We'll both go," she said. "But I don't want you stepping *one* toe on that ice, understood?"

He nodded quickly and they went to look at the pond. Lucio asked question after question about how the ice formed, which Hermione answered to the best of her ability. He wondered if they might be able to skate on the ice. Hermione had never considered that and told him it depended on the thickness of the ice when it was fully frozen. Lucio seemed content and hopeful with that answer, and Hermione made a mental note to find him some ice skates soon, if time allowed.

They spent some time walking around in the garden next. It was a cloudy day but to her relief it didn't snow again—only a frigid wind blew, nipping at the hem of her and Lucio's winter robes.

Her parents had received the funds Draco had sent several weeks ago. The deposits were always conducted in a manner that left no return address in case the Grangers/Wilkinsons wanted to contact them or return the money. One might wonder why such large sums of money appeared from nowhere in one's bank account but the Obliviate seemed to fold itself around that mystery too, so the Grangers never took it upon themselves to inquire.

Hermione had written them a note (with no return address) after Draco had managed the funds, having overseen the process for the first time, and thanked them for their hospitality. She had wanted to include a line that said she hoped to see them again soon but held back from writing it, not wanting to dole out false hope.

Draco had shown her the documents and she'd noted the large sum that was to be transferred, balked a little at the amount, not having expected him to be *quite* so generous. Draco had smiled, squeezed her hand.

"I'm a horrid man," he acknowledged easily, "but I wouldn't dare let the family of my treasured wife go destitute. Although to be honest, no sum I could send them could ever amount to your worth, sweetness."

She'd bristled at that.

I think they would prefer having their daughter with them safe and sound over all the money in the world, she thought bitterly. You treat this like a business transaction. Like you bought me from them.

For all his praise and flattery, it would never amount to anything less than that.

But she held her tongue, and had let him take and squeeze her hand gently.

Still, the sending of money had relieved some of her disquiet after her visit. She took a pinch of powdery snow from the ground and flicked it over her son's head, smiling. He felt some of it land in his hair and giggled.

"It's pixie dust," she said—Lucio's current bedtime book was Peter Pan.

"I don't need pixie dust to fly!" Lucio declared. "I have a broom!"

"Well, it would be nice to be able to fly without one, wouldn't it?" she asked.

Lucio mulled it over. "Yes," he finally decided. Then he frowned and looked up at her with his head tilted. There was a red flush across his face from the cold—Hermione took that as a sign they should head back inside soon.

"I've never seen you fly, mummy. Do you know how?"

Hermione nodded.

"I know a little, but I don't like to," she replied, sounding a little wistful. "I'm afraid of heights, and I get very dizzy if I go up too high on a broom."

"Oh."

Lucio could not wrap his mind around this. To him flying at great heights felt as easy as walking or breathing. Even the very first time he'd ever lifted up into the air, he'd felt no fear but great anticipation and excitement instead.

'You're a natural, just like me' father had said proudly, and Lucio had beamed.

Hermione bent down a little and held out her hand, waiting for him to take it.

"Let's get inside, my love," she said. "We can't delay your lessons any longer, I'm afraid."

Lucio sighed and reached out to take her offered hand when something behind her caught his eye.

“Wait,” he said hurriedly, and went to it. Hermione turned and watched him curiously.

They’d been standing next to a tall stone planter dusted with snow, its flowers dry and shriveled but still colorful underneath. Lucio thought they looked alright anyways and picked them off, gathered a few of those and some roses into a little bunch, and presented them to his mother with a smile.

“Can’t we stay out for *five* more minutes?” he pleaded.

Hermione folded at once, touched by the sweet gesture—even if it also served as a bribe.

“Oh, alright,” she said, but before he could get away she took him up into her arms, pressing kisses all over his face.

The moment she let him back down he zipped off to explore the garden a little more with his precious freedom. Hermione held the flowers carefully in her hands, feeling the ice melt off them from her body heat and drip down her palms as she watched her son.

He was getting heavier. Taller—indeed, he seemed to have shot up a few inches since the summer. He would likely be as tall as his father by the time he reached adolescence. Would he surpass Draco? Time would tell, but certainly one day soon he would be too big for her to carry. Too old to beg for stories before bed. Would he begin to resent her affections? Were her kisses and embraces for him numbered? Her heart felt heavy with the thought.

When the five minutes had passed, Hermione called out to Lucio who returned gleefully, his cheeks rosy from activity. They went back inside and Pansy met them at the door to usher Lucio up to the nursery to change out of his outdoor clothes and freshen up (as he’d gotten rather grubby) and take him to his tutors.

Hermione changed too, still feeling the chill from outside. She placed Lucio’s flowers on her dresser, summoning a small vessel to display them there and went into the closet to find something to wear.

There was no sign of Neville and Luna—they were still in Draco’s clutches, then—and she had not seen nor heard sign of George yet, either.

Pansy had told her that Martin had already arrived and was setting up. She would go take a peek at Draco’s office to see if Neville and Luna actually were there. Probably Draco had been wondering where she was, and why Lucio’s lessons had been delayed. She would go coddle him, and then run downstairs to Martin.

As she walked to the other side of the house, she ran into Draco, who appeared at the staircase so suddenly that she startled badly, almost falling to the ground.

He caught her at once, his strong hands helping her regain her balance.

“Merlin, Draco,” she panted. “Why can’t you just *walk* from place to place?”

His chuckle was smooth and low, but he apologized with a gentle kiss.

“Apparition is so much faster, and I don’t always have the patience to walk,” he said. “Forgive me, my love. Did I really scare you?”

Hermione shook her head though her heart was still pounding.

“I was looking for you,” she said.

“You were?” he asked, his eyes lighting up.

Hermione couldn’t mock his enthusiasm. She’d spent so much time in their marriage trying to *avoid* him that of course he would be delighted by the opposite.

Honestly, she hadn’t even planned that to have that effect, but an opportunity was an opportunity and she wasn’t about to squander it.

She nodded a little shyly, and he reached to take her chin in his hand to angle her face to stare up into his eyes.

Her legs already felt a little weak just from one glance. It was easy to drown in his gaze if she didn’t guard herself. That much had always been true, at least.

“Why?” he murmured. She watched his mouth move, her throat running dry. He licked his lips, and her gaze flicked back up to meet his stare. Both their pupils were dilated.

“I... I wanted to see you.”

Get hold of yourself.

But look, the warped voice said suddenly. *Look how he eats it up. Like honey dripping from your lips.*

He came in closer, his face a mere inch from hers.

“I’m in your hands, my Lady,” he said throatily. “What do you want of me?”

She grappled for an answer.

It was then that Hermione looked down and noticed he had his traveling cloak on.

“I’ve been called away for a spell,” he said, noticing her stare.

“What for?” she asked, reaching up to toy with the clasp at his throat with one hand.

“Ministry business,” he said. “There’s been a small group of opposition to the way the *Prophet* is being run lately. Nott’s got a nice little list of names of the ones who refused to quiet down despite bribes and threats, so I believe it’s time to deal with them in my own way to set an example.”

“Killing journalists is never a good move, Draco,” Hermione said, frowning. “Word will spread. It’ll turn people against you.”

He smiled.

“You’re right,” he said. “But don’t worry, sweetling. I won’t kill anyone *yet*. I only mean to use an Imperius on most to shut them up. They were noble enough to turn their noses up at my money—well, they’ll face my magic instead.”

“Couldn’t you get Nott to do it?” she asked.

“I could,” he admitted, “but you know me, sweetheart. I want full control of everything. I must be there to make sure it’s handled properly. I may trust Nott and George, but I trust myself best.”

“George will be there?”

“Yes. He’s really quite useful in matters like this.”

In her other hand, Hermione still carried one dead bloom from the tiny bouquet Lucio had given her.

Draco pulled her forward, his hands sliding around her waist.

“Come with me, firebird,” he said, kissing her lightly. “Keep me company. I’ll find an empty room I can worship you in. Perhaps I’ll give you a few wizards of your own to punish if you’d like.”

She hated that her body was already reacting to his suggestion—she pressed her thighs together, tried to clear her mind.

“I’ll stay,” she said.

Draco bent forward, his hands squeezing her with the strength of a bear, and gave her a rougher kiss. Hermione gave into it, let his tongue invade, let his saliva mix with hers, his taste to linger in her mouth like a bitter tonic.

“Fuck,” he groaned quietly. It took everything in him to break away. “Are you sure I can’t persuade you?”

He took her chin again gently. She was flushed and short of breath, her eyes full of want. His thumb rubbed along her bottom lip.

“As tempting as that sounds, I’m rather tired,” she said, trying to smile.

Before he could try to persuade her again, she raised her arm and offered him a dead rose.

He looked at it, so surprised that he said nothing for a moment. Then he looked up at her, unsure of her meaning.

“Lucio gave me some earlier,” she said simply. “And I saved one for you.”

Draco reached out and touched it with a graze of his fingertip, dragging it down the delicate lip of a dried petal.

“How thoughtful of you,” he said.

The rose was slowly coming back to life. Where it had been dry and crumbling, it was turning soft and lush again, vivid as blood. The stem itself grew thick and green again, its leaves unfolding proudly, restored to their original state.

Draco had cast no magic over the bloom. He stared at it, his brows raised, and then met her eyes, comprehending.

“Hermione,” he whispered in awe.

Hermione pinned the rose onto his cloak, fixing it there with magic so that it wouldn't fall off, making sure the bloom was prominently displayed over his heart.

"You need some color on you," she said. Her face felt warm.

Her hands were flat and warm on his chest. Draco watched her as though stuck in a trance.

"You astonish me," he said, sounding proud, cupping her face in his hands. "Can you do it again?"

He let her pull away so they could both look at the renewed bloom. Hermione concentrated hard, harnessing her magic as she touched a petal.

It was strange, like watching a time-lapse. The bloom withered, shrinking, and then waxed again, vibrantly red and lush, a mark atop his heart.

"Incredible," Draco breathed. "I've never seen anyone do that without the aid of potions and time. And it isn't an illusion, either-I didn't think that sort of thing was possible. You must continue practicing, Hermione. Go outside, see what more you can do."

He kissed her hand.

"Persephone, indeed. It brings me such joy to see it."

"You can't do it, too?" she asked, curious.

Draco frowned and tried it for himself. Nothing happened.

"Hardly surprising, is it?" he asked with a chuckle. "I think my destructive nature played a part in that when I made the Horcrux. Well, thank you for sharing that with me, sweetling."

Hermione found Neville and Luna after Draco left. They seemed no worse for wear and bowed silently when she came across them in the corridor.

They both stood so stiffly, looking as though their spines might break if they even dared slouch.

"Why are you outside the bedroom?" she asked. "Draco just left."

"Lord Malfoy ordered us to stand watch outside the bedroom until his return, my Lady," Neville said.

Hermione frowned.

"Have you eaten?"

Luna hesitated, and then shook her head. Neville's mouth was a grim line.

"Go," Hermione said. "Take a break and eat. Take an hour to yourselves. Never mind what he said. If he finds out, I'll deal with him."

There was a brief spark of panic in Luna's eye. Hermione understood.

"Don't worry," she said. "Everything will be fine. Please rest."

A moment passed—Neville was the first to break.

He inclined his head.

“You are very kind, my Lady.”

They’d known each other for years, but with the way he had to speak now, it sounded as though they were perfect strangers.

“You can call me Hermione when he isn’t here,” she said. “Pansy and George know this. I’m not as formal as Draco.”

“He holds us to a higher standard, my Lady,” Neville said, meeting her eye awkwardly. “If we grow too comfortable and speak to each other like we did before, and he finds out...”

He needed not continue. Hermione knew Draco was waiting eagerly for a chance to punish Neville and Luna for any transgression, however minor it might be.

Luna had her eyes cast down, a blush on her cheeks.

“I understand,” Hermione said. “I only—”

I only wanted to make things less awkward. I wanted to let you know I still care for you, even if it doesn’t make sense.

But Neville was right—it was too dangerous.

“Very well,” she said. “You’d better go eat. I’ll summon you if you’re needed.”

They bowed.

“Thank you, my Lady,” Luna said in an awkward tone.

Hermione watched them leave, wondering if it was a good idea for her to join them—truth be told, she didn’t quite want to. What more was there to say? They were already damned.

Where’s Pansy?

Probably with Lucio in the nursery. She glanced at a nearby clock—Lucio’s lessons were set to end in an hour and a half—there was more than enough time to slip away and satisfy her current need with Martin.

Heart thumping in her chest, Hermione made her way to the library.

“It worked,” she said to Martin, pressed tight against him though they were both still fully clothed.

“Good,” he said with a crooked smile. “Even though I’ve done it before, part of me still fears I’ll mess it up every time I animate a new painting. Have you started speaking to it?”

Hermione nodded, thinking of her painted counterpart, trapped within that canvas.

“Would you want to come with me?” she breathed into his chest. They were both lying on the dais in a tangle of limbs. His hand brushed at her temple.

Was it a foolish thing to ask? Probably, yes. But she couldn't help herself.

"Where?"

"Anywhere. If I could escape from here, and we were free to go anywhere: would you want to come with me?"

He looked surprised.

"You could come stay with me, wherever I go," she said. "And Lucio. We'd be far away from here."

"What about-?"

"He isn't part of that scenario," she said. Sounded so convincing-he wanted to believe her.

His eyes searched hers solemnly.

"Would you marry me if I asked?"

She had expected him to bring that up, and smiled sadly.

"I've only been married once," she said, her voice soft and low. "And it's convinced me I don't ever want to have another."

He was frowning, but nodded in understanding.

"I can't love anyone else," she continued. "It's too dangerous, and you know why. Would you still want to come, knowing that?"

There was a moment where he pondered his response-and then instead asked the question he had been wondering for some time now, the one he thought he would never have the courage to ask.

"What am I to you?"

Hermione reached over, cupping his cheek in her hand.

"A sanctuary," she said simply. 'A pool where I can wash the blood off me and forget about everything else. A friend.' She took in a shuddering breath. "I do care for you, Martin. You're exactly what I needed. You're kind and understanding, and you don't demand more than I can give. But I can't love you. I hope you can understand."

"I think I do," he replied. Turned his head to kiss her palm. "Maybe in time, you'll change your mind. It would be dangerous enough for me to stay here on my own, but I think you know I would follow you anywhere."

Hermione smiled, leaning in to kiss him. He reciprocated hungrily, and her hands were busy at his chest, undoing the buttons on his blouse.

[HOURS LATER]

Moonlight filled the library from the open windows. Martin was long gone, and the place seemed bereft and still without his presence.

As it turned out, she hadn't needed to rush. Draco had yet to return. He must have been busy indeed, for he hadn't communicated once since he had left.

She and Lucio had taken their lunch together in the afternoon with Neville and Luna keeping watch while Pansy took her break, and then they'd gone back to the library until Martin had left for the day. Hermione had tried to persuade him to stay, but he'd been tired from their earlier bout, and had important errands to run back home.

Command him to stay and tend to you, the voice had whispered seductively in her ear. He would gladly obey. Or summon the other one.

Hermione had almost done it—but resisted the impulse. She hated the idea of imposing her will over others. Draco's followers were separate from this notion. She might have commanded Nott to do it without hesitation or remorse—but Martin was different. He had his reasons to go, and she didn't want him to fear or resent her.

Pansy Apparated down to the library to inform her that Lucio wished to go play outdoors again. Hermione gave her permission and made sure that Lucio wore enough layers despite his protests.

Neville and Luna had obediently gone back to their stations outside the bedroom door. With plenty of time left still until dinner, she had the place to herself. It was quiet but it didn't bother her much—she wandered around and tried to distract herself by poring over some books, sat down by the fire and tried napping but couldn't calm her mind enough for it to work.

She couldn't stop thinking about Martin. The way he felt with his body pressed to hers, the way he'd felt inside her as he'd come. She was growing wet again, felt desire root itself in her once more. She wanted him again.

Earlier, with the library to themselves again, she'd felt bold enough to ask him to take the lead this time, to be as rough as he wanted. He'd accepted—hesitantly, thawing by degrees, still finding his footing, still afraid to hurt her. It frustrated her a little. But she knew better than to press him over it, and resolved to be patient.

Hermione's hand slipped down between her thighs. She spread her legs a little, moved the fabric of her clothes out of the way. She had hardly even let the thought fully form before she heard the loud, heavy click of the doors to the library locking.

She relaxed into the seat, leaning back, touching herself. Another log appeared in the fire and it sprang higher in the hearth, warming her instantly.

Martin was a gentle lover. He might surprise her, of course, but she did not feel it in his nature to be rough and selfish like Draco unless she encouraged him to be so. He liked to take his time, go about things slowly—her hips shifted in pleasure—he put her enjoyment over his. If she felt her needs weren't being met in the way she wanted, then all she had to do was take the lead. But with Martin she felt safe enough to let him take charge, too.

Hermione closed her eyes, imagined him there with her again, grasping her body close to his, his mouth all over her skin, his hair falling across his face. She always liked the feeling of his hands on her body—his touch was always considerate and admiring rather than possessive and restricting like Draco's.

She would have liked to deny him and gauge his reaction.

Hunger made a man different... perhaps it might make him ravenous and cruel, too. He might grip her hair and pull her in for kisses that left her breathless. He might slap and pinch, might take control of her body. He might use that grip to make her head bob on his cock until she gagged and begged for a chance to take breath. She would love his taste, would swallow it down eagerly. Would let him between her legs to lick and make her gasp and tremble. She savored every moan and gasp she'd wrung from him so far. And there was still so much to experience.

Martin was her secret, a quiet oasis in which she could lose herself in a way that was not damnable. His attentions were a refuge, a place to experience something different on her own terms.

Over time, Draco had conditioned her to want as he wanted—rough, intense, relentless, but overwhelming. Painful. Cruel. He was gentle when he wanted to be, but it was not his preference. Even if she asked him to go slower, or to gentle his actions, he would obey for a few minutes—and then selfishly go back to his own tastes.

That was what he meant when he said no one could ever compare. He trained me thoroughly to want it the way he gives it.

That left a bitter taste on her tongue. Hermione hated to acknowledge that point, but it was true—she'd felt it when she'd made love to Harry in her dream. Now she was having to face it with Martin. The only love she'd known for most of her life was the ruinous type, the kind that drained you constantly, always demanding more to sustain itself. The kind that never went dormant—it was always there just under the surface, ready to flare up again at a moment's notice. She had raged and rebelled against it for so long, going from abhorring it to *wanting it. Reveling in it.*

It should have dismayed her. It did, a little. But she should have supposed it would happen—Draco had worked hard to earn her corruption from the start.

Maybe I can train myself back to normal, she thought, unconvinced. *Like I was before.*

Or, said the warped voice, learn to embrace your nature and let yourself burn everything in your wake. You may have a new appetite, but that does not mean you must admit defeat—only that you must learn to wield it, sharpen it. Use it to your advantage.

Perhaps Martin might oblige her if she asked. Nott certainly would—he was very eager to please, but it wasn't him she truly wanted, though she enjoyed using him. With him, it would mean nothing, would not hold the same satisfaction.

She pushed the thought of Nott away, picturing Martin again. He would sink in deep, steal her breath with every thrust. Perhaps he might leave a mark or two—a bruise or a bite, if he was brave enough. Would his mouth ravage her breasts like Draco always did? Would he leave her completely spent and unable to speak or move yet deeply satisfied, as her husband often left her? If she tied him down, would he wrestle against those binds in order to touch her, or would he accept his fate and await her caress?

Need blazed. Her fingers sped up. Now her other hand came down, pushed inside herself. She was so wet. Hermione moaned, her breaths turning shallow, and began to thrust.

A sudden idea came to her. Hermione reached into the channel Draco had forged between their minds.

The dark void stretched on into a tunnel, one she couldn't see the end of—could only feel Draco's distant presence at the other end, dormant.

She lingered there a moment, feeling him. Though the connection was currently closed she sensed him there still, that ever-present familiarity settling deep into her bones. Where was he now? What was he doing?

She reached through, called out to him silently.

Something flared in the tunnel as he responded. It passed around her like a hot breeze in the tunnel, shining subtly with light.

Yes, my love? Came his instant reply. *Is something amiss?*

She dared push further, to test the capabilities of this power. Just how far did these abilities stretch? She looked down at herself, at what her hands were doing, and sent him that image.

He swore viciously in reply.

How are you doing that? He demanded, curious. *I didn't know that was possible.*

But he was quickly distracted, too intent on the image she'd sent him. She continued playing with herself, deliberately slowing her movements, teasing him.

You wicked witch, he replied, his voice rough with want. She could picture the lust in his eyes.

How very delicious. Show me how wet you are, sweetheart.

She did, still not saying a word, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of hearing the want in her voice. Her fingers spread her arousal along her inner thighs—she raised that hand to her mouth to taste. This was submission enough, that she had chosen to show him this.

Fuck, he said. Then, with more emphasis. ***Fuck.***

He finished abruptly, as if he'd gotten cut off, or cut himself off. The channel was suddenly silent—Hermione smiled, wondering if he'd been in the middle of his business. Would he rush home after all?

She continued playing with herself, giving in to her fantasies. She pictured Martin's face, brought to mind how he'd sounded the last time she'd sucked him off. He'd moaned and pleaded so wonderfully, his hands holding her hair back, his hips straining not to push into her mouth. She'd enjoyed every drop. Perhaps tomorrow, if there was an opportunity, she would do it again.

The channel was alive again suddenly—an image, not her own, occupied her vision.

Briefly taken aback, Hermione froze, only to recognize it having come from Draco.

As it turns out, I can do this, too, he said, sounding pleased.

I never doubted, Hermione replied, a little breathlessly.

What a delight, Draco said. And then he laughed. You made me run off to wank in some broom closet like a sodding teenager. I couldn't wait.

If I must bear your absence in some sort of discomfort, then you should, too, she replied, a little smug. You're taking longer than I thought.

Her fingers pushed back inside herself—she sighed in pleasure.

The picture sent from his end turned to a moving image—he was in a broom closet, the only source of light a wavering orb in the ceiling. His trousers were open and his hand was around his huge cock, stroking himself furiously. It was fully erect and throbbing, its veins set in stark relief in the dim light.

Show me again, little bird, he said. Please.

She obeyed, pulling her fingers out to spread them open and show him the sticky wetness she'd gathered.

This could be all yours if you were here, she said, taunting him.

I ought to spank you silly for this, he muttered. My darling wife, you astound me.

He groaned. Reached down with his other hand to play with his balls. His cock was already weeping thick white pearls of precum. Hermione watched them slide down his shaft, fingering herself with a rising urgency.

Show me how you want it, he said, slowing his strokes. So when I come home tonight I know exactly how to please you.

She was so close already. They were miles and miles apart but his voice was in her head as though he were right beside her. Her fingers were not enough—she had unfortunately grown too used to his size, to his overwhelming presence around and inside her. She almost hoped he would rush home that moment, so she could satisfy herself. She tried not to dwell on it, only focused on showing him what she wanted, how deep, what pace.

His breathing was audible in her ear—she could almost feel his breath rushing over her throat. Kept trying to visualize Martin doing these things to her with his own hands but he kept morphing back into Draco. She gave up with a harsh sigh, focusing her attention back to between her legs.

That's right, Draco was saying. He resumed a fast pace, matching the rhythm she had set for herself. Fuck that gorgeous cunt, sweetheart. I want to hear you moan. Get yourself ready for me tonight. You want it hard? I'll make you scream yourself hoarse. I'll fill your sweet little cunt until it can't take anymore, and I'll have to use your mouth instead.

Hermione clenched, pleasure spiking. She stroked herself deep, making her own toes curl—a breathy moan rose from her lips.

You wicked temptress, Hermione, he crooned into her ear. The second I get home I'm going to tie you to the bed and give it to you all night. I'll drown you in pleasure. Is that what you wish, my Lady? You want me to savage that venomous little cunt?

She didn't answer—her climax choked her suddenly. She let out a cry, her fingers working herself furiously, her thighs quivering and her eyes squeezing shut.

Draco followed instantly, moaning. She could picture his sharp teeth biting into his own lip.

He was showing it to her live as it happened—Hermione saw him explode like a geyser, huge bursts of cum shooting from him and out of view. She could see his abdominal muscles flexing and hear his panting in the background. She was barely coming down from her climax, panting hard, sweat dewing up at her temples.

Thank you for this treat, he finally said. It was a delightful surprise. If I could I would go home now, but I can't. Not yet. Just keep yourself wet for me, sweetling. And I don't want you to come again until I'm there with you. Will you do that for me?

Yes, my Lord.

He didn't reply—the connection had closed. But he was pleased and she smiled to herself as she rose from the couch on slightly wobbly legs.

When he came home, she was standing by the bed. She'd just been dressing for bed, and had her back to him, but turned when she heard him enter. Their eyes locked. He was on her immediately, shredding her nightgown between his teeth and hands. His erection was hot and insistent, pressing against her as he moved with her, the both of them crawling backwards on the bed until they reached the middle.

She was breathless already, his mouth hot and sharp and all over her.

"What took you so long?" she asked, lifting her leg to let him slide the last of her nightgown off.

"Doesn't matter," he said, his words muffled as he buried his face into her throat. His hand squeezed her bare breast hard enough to make her squirm. "Nothing but this matters."

He kissed her again, his tongue bold and possessive over her face. He licked her cheek, moaning, his free hand slowly sliding down to her core. She had kept her promise, and he found her eager and welcoming. He settled between her thighs, pressing kisses to her belly and then her mound. Her natural scent was strong between her legs, and she was sensitive, judging from the way she was reddened and swollen there.

Bliss. He inhaled deep, took it in greedily. Let his tongue dart out and absorb her taste. Hermione moaned. Draco gave her thigh a gentle nibble, smirking.

"Was it terribly hard, waiting for me to come home?" he asked huskily, his finger tracing a lazy pattern over her swollen lips, trailing her arousal around. Her clit was a poor, engorged bud, begging for attention. He dragged his finger against it and she keened, clutching at his shoulder.

She nodded.

"Please, my Lord," she said. "Draco, I need you."

He caressed her clit lovingly, using a tender touch, but Hermione was so on edge that she arched into him, crying out.

“—ah!”

He sped up his actions, stroking her with a speed that ignited her near to combustion. Hermione quivered under his touch, grasping his shoulders.

“Yes,” she moaned. “Yes. More, Draco.”

He obeyed gladly, and watched with satisfaction as she came under his hand, writhing helplessly, her face flushed.

“Is that all?” she panted when she was able to speak again. “I waited all night just to come in under two minutes?”

Draco smiled, clicked his fingers.

Hermione felt her hands pulled upward and restrained above her head onto the mattress.

He was kneeling above her, stroking himself.

“Your poor little hands must be tired,” he said. “Let me take over, my Lady.”

Hermione shivered as he adjusted himself to fit between her thighs, and kissed his way up to her mouth. He kissed her hungrily, one hand on his cock, guiding himself to her slit.

“Mine,” he was whispering hoarsely into her shoulder.

He was pushing in slowly—Hermione wrapped her legs around him, and bit his lower lip playfully.

Need propelled him to bury his face into her throat, to kiss the vein he intended to drink from. He pushed in further, and she gasped, her mouth falling slack.

“Just a little more,” he murmured, nibbling on her throat.

“Give it to me,” she hissed, and groaned as Draco proceeded to do just that, and punctured her throat in the same stroke.

He moaned, her hot blood filling his mouth. She clenched around him and he began to thrust, already rougher than he’d meant to. But she was grinding into him, seeking more.

My good little wife, he thought, lust and red filling his mind like a haze. I just can’t control myself around you.

Longbottom was outside the door when Draco emerged the following morning.

“Good morning, my Lord,” he said flatly, bowing.

Draco gave him a cold smile.

“I hope we weren’t too loud last night.”

“Not at all, my Lord.”

Neville’s eyes were fixed straight ahead, not meeting Draco’s. His jaw was tight and Draco suspected his fists were clenched but when he looked down they were not.

“Good,” Draco replied, smirking. “My wife can be quite the ravenous creature, you see. It’s all I can do to keep her satiated.”

Longbottom did not reply. Draco didn’t mind. He had shown a remarkable restraint so far, despite his goading. He found it amusing, in fact.

“Tend to my wife,” he said, jerking his chin toward the door. “I don’t think she’s in a fit state to untie herself. I drank more than I probably should have.”

“I don’t *need* tending to,” came Hermione’s voice from within the room. “I’ve already undone it, anyway.”

Malfoy merely smiled.

“I’ll be surprised if she can even walk,” he said, his voice lowered, as if sharing a joke between friends. “Go to her and see that she’s well.”

Neville bowed.

“Yes, my Lord.”

Lord Malfoy set off down the hall, his face without expression, but Neville could sense the smugness radiating from him. It was vile. He braced himself, then entered the room.

Lady Malfoy was on the bed, rubbing at her wrists. There was quite a length of rope on the bed, creased and dented where it had been knotted and wrapped. The sheets were tossed about, strewn onto the floor and across the bed. The smell of sex was heavy in the air—by now Neville was accustomed to it, but it still churned his stomach to see Hermione in the midst of it. He was glad Luna had been called to work with Pansy that morning, so she didn’t have to witness this.

He approached.

“Good morning, my Lady,” he said.

Her wrists were raw and marked from the rope. So were her ankles. She moved a little carefully, as if she was indeed sore from the previous night—judging by the sounds he’d been forced to hear, she had every reason to be. Her hair was so long, streaming down in a thick curly mass all the way down her back and to the bed. It was wild and tangled, as if Malfoy had bunched it in his fist repeatedly.

“Good morning,” she replied. She had her back to him. Her voice was quite hoarse. She tried to clear her throat. “You don’t need to stay. I can manage.”

“My Lord commanded me to make sure you are well,” Neville said. “He’ll be displeased if I leave.”

She snorted. “Very well. Stay, then.”

She stood, wavering slightly—Neville tensed, ready to rush forward, sensing that she might fall.

She held out a hand. “Don’t be alarmed. He drank a little too much from me last night, that’s all. I’m fine.”

Neville nodded, but stayed in place.

She had her back to him, was gathering her hair over one shoulder. The bite mark was revealed—Neville's eyes widened.

There were the usual twin holes embedded into her throat, still gaping, but no longer bleeding. Before he could look away, flagged his sight and pulled it downward to her right trapezius muscle—there was a bite there, too.

"Do you need a Healer?" Neville asked. "I'll call for one now."

She shook her head. Looked rather tired and distant, but no worse for wear... that he could tell.

"I'll be fine," she said firmly. "I'll heal them myself."

She pressed her palm to the ones on her throat, watched as they healed. Then the one on her shoulder. He wondered how much pain, if at all, she felt from them. She'd hardly even flinched.

What happens if he takes too much? He wondered. *Enough to kill a human—but they've got Horcruxes. What would happen? Would she just come right back? Would it be instant?*

She did look quite pale, more than usual. And it seemed to be taking a good deal of effort for her to remain upright.

She was *pregnant*, for Merlin's sake—how could Malfoy leave her in such a state?

Neville felt sick to his stomach. The bites could have been healed at any time. Malfoy had tied her up to prevent her from healing herself. And to make him see this...

She saw the accusation in his gaze.

"This isn't the first time it's happened," she said firmly. "So I don't need you losing your mind over this. He's careful enough not to kill me. He's cruel, and he's greedy, but he isn't *that* idiotic."

Neville forced himself to nod.

"Why do you let him?" he asked before he could stop himself.

She looked at him and Neville began to backtrack at once.

"I meant no offense," he blurted, inclining his head. "Forgive me, my Lady."

She gave a small shake of her head, as if telling him not to worry, and summoned a robe to wrap around herself.

"I don't need to explain myself to you," she said, and even though there was no anger in her tone, her eyes still flashed red.

"You're right," Neville said, fighting not to back away. "I misspoke. I'm sorry, my Lady."

"I want to be alone," Hermione said. "Go to Pansy and Luna. I'll summon one of you when I'm finished."

“Of course,” Neville said, face was red, he could feel it. Would she tell Malfoy about his impertinence?

“Is there anything you need before I go, my Lady?”

She began to shake her head, then seemed to think better of it.

“Bring me something to eat,” she said. “I’ll recover faster with food, I think.”

“I’ll send something up as soon as possible,” Neville said with one last bow, and left the room as fast as his legs would carry him, the image of her red eyes stuck in his mind, chilling him to the bone.

Neville went to the nursery, discreetly told Pansy and Luna what had happened and what he needed from her.

Pansy sent word through to the house elf at once for a meal to be sent upstairs. Luna had gone pale at hearing his account. She covered her mouth with her hand and then looked toward the boy, who was at his table writing. One of his tutors was reading over his shoulder and pointed to an error, but Lucio was too busy watching the three servants suspiciously to notice.

“What’s going on?” he called out to them “Why are you all whispering?”

“We’re figuring out what we want for lunch,” Pansy replied at once, smiling. “Do you want salmon or chicken?”

Lucio deliberated for a moment. “Chicken, please.”

“Great,” Pansy said. “Now get back to your work, my dear.”

He did, eyeing them suspiciously one last time before turning back to his tutor.

Pansy, Luna and Neville exited the nursery to continue their discussion.

“What do we do?” Luna asked.

Pansy beckoned for them to follow. She went swiftly to the potions cabinet in the kitchen and pulled out two bottles, handed them to Neville.

“Make note of these,” she ordered. “I started stocking them when I learned about the drinking. They’re still unopened so you’ll have to break the seal. My Lord may be careful, but I like to be prepared.”

Neville nodded grimly, and then the three of them set off for the master bedroom. Along the way, he studied the labels of the potions carefully.

Blood Replenishment

For cases involving vampires or serious loss of blood. If patient has fallen unconscious consult a Healer before administering. Take no more than one dose per day. Mix one tablespoon with water. DO NOT take on an empty stomach.

Vitality Restoration

Two doses daily for adults only. Do not take on an empty stomach.

"Why does he do it?" Luna asked. "Why does he need to drink her blood if he isn't a vampire?"

Pansy shook her head. "I can only guess, but I have my theories."

"Which are?"

Pansy took a moment to respond. "I've worked here for many years now. I've overheard countless conversations between them. Had to see how he treats her. Seen the depths of his obsession... I think he loves her so much he sees that drinking her blood is like making her part of him... He'll consume her in any way he can, just shy of cannibalism." She looked distressed. "For now. It's truly the most disturbing and bizarre relationship I've ever seen."

Neville told her about the Lady's request and Pansy set about managing for some food from the kitchen to be sent upstairs at once.

"Does Lucio know?"

"No," Pansy said. "He won't know of any of this. It's their discretion to share that with him, though why they would I can't imagine. Our job is to make sure they *both* are well and to keep their secrets. We do not judge, no matter what happens or how we feel about it. We simply serve."

They had reached the bedroom now and entered, headed straight into the bathroom. The door was still open and steam flowed out of it and into the bedroom.

"My Lady," Pansy called. She was already at the tub, kneeling beside Hermione. Her black robes pooled around her like a spill of ink over the white tiles of the bathroom floor.

Lady Hermione, still reclining in the tub, seemed to be unconscious. Neville's stomach sank with dread—but then she stirred, raising her head to look at them. Her voice was still a little faint, but stronger than before.

"Really, Pansy, I'm fine," she said.

"I know you are," Pansy said gently. "But it would give me more peace of mind if you took these."

"I already ate the food you sent down," Hermione said. "It helped. Thank you."

"That's good to hear," Pansy said, "but I must insist, my Lady."

Hermione sighed. "I don't think I need them. I'm feeling better already. But I'll take them for your sake."

Pansy smiled. "I'm grateful."

She gestured for Neville to hand over the bottles.

Neville handed them over dutifully.

Lady Hermione took a dose of each potion as they watched.

The results were quick—Hermione was sitting up now, some color had returned to her complexion and she seemed much more alert. She was holding Pansy's hand, who was still feeling her forehead with the other.

"Thank you."

"How do you feel, my Lady?" Luna asked.

"Much better," Hermione said. "I think I can stand now."

Neville turned to face an opposite wall as they helped her from the tub. The water was shut off and drained.

Pansy summoned a towel and robe for Hermione, and helped her into them, then escorted her out of the bathroom and to the bed, where she sat down.

"Where is my darling husband?" Hermione asked. She rubbed at her forehead.

"In his office," Pansy said. "I expect he'll want to know you've recovered."

Hermione laughed, to their surprise. "Yes, I think he would. Well, I'll dress and then go to him. I'd like to return the favor."

Neville frowned. Averted his eyes as she shed her coverings and began to dress herself, half manually, half with the aid of her magic.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you," she continued, addressing them all. "I'm afraid I provoked him a little too much yesterday and he couldn't contain himself."

"It isn't your fault he acted that way," Pansy said.

"No, it isn't," Hermione agreed. "Now how is Lucio?"

"He was suspicious," Pansy said. "He's very perceptive—I think he sensed something was wrong."

"I'll see him first, then," Hermione said, striding to the door. They moved to follow behind her, but at that moment the door opened and Draco entered.

He saw Hermione at the door and took her arm, swept her back into the bedroom.

"Firebird," he was saying, his voice full of warmth. "You're well again. I'm so relieved. I was interested in seeing how quickly you would recover. It seems you still have a way to go—but then again, I made your Horcrux quite a while after I made mine. You'll catch up soon, I expect."

He kissed her deeply, his palms pressing her face to his. When they broke apart he held her close, his arms wrapped tightly around her. Hermione did not resist.

"I was an animal last night, wasn't I?" he said gently. "I should have been more careful, considering your condition."

"In more ways than one, my Lord," Hermione replied. "You are reckless to the point of being foolish. If you wanted to conduct a test, you should have confided in me."

“By the time the idea occurred to me, firebird, you were past the point of speaking,” he said. “But you’re right—I should have asked.”

He smiled. His sharp teeth gleamed. Neville couldn’t stop staring at them.

“I’m afraid my excitement ran away from me,” he said. “I ought to control myself better. It won’t happen again.”

Empty words. It would. They all knew it.

Neville pictured Malfoy sitting smugly in his office all morning, perfect and healthy with the lifeforce he’d stolen from his wife.

Parasite, he thought, disgusted.

Then he looked at Hermione. She didn’t look angry, but there was a coolness in her stare that gave him pause. Her words to Malfoy had been calm, but her eyes told a different story. There was a touch of red creeping into them that made him instinctively take a step back.

He was so focused on her eyes that he didn’t see what happened below them.

“I’ll make sure it doesn’t,” she said coldly. And then she moved, almost too fast for everyone else’s eyes but Draco’s to catch.

There was a wet, slicing sound. Then a heavy *thump*. Neville hardly knew what he had heard until he saw the severed hand on the floor, and then Malfoy’s slightly stunned expression.

His eyes flicked back to Hermione—she was fixated on Malfoy, her face morphed with rage. Her eyes were red, bright red now—a thrill of terror ran through Neville. Somehow she appeared sharper all over. Stronger. More creature-like. Like she was moments away from bursting through her own skin. The weak Hermione from less than a half-hour ago—had that been a vision? A trick? Here was the exact opposite.

His legs had gone weak—he glanced at Luna and Pansy, unsure if what he was seeing was real. Luna looked horrified, her hand over her mouth. Had Pansy seen this before? But she was looking at him too for confirmation, her eyes alarmed but not quite as shocked as Luna.

It hit him then—this was not new. This had been building up. Pansy knew, and judging from Malfoy’s lack of shock, so did he.

He looked at Hermione again, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end, thinking of her Horcrux, and thought: *not human*.

Luna’s other hand gripped his arm tightly in fear.

“You’re too reckless, my Lord,” Lady Hermione was saying to Malfoy. “And I’ll have to chastise you, since you’re only too happy to act like a wild dog, tearing up everything you come across.”

Lord Malfoy was staring at his severed hand, his expression unreadable. An injury like that would have rendered any normal person to a quavering, screaming mess. Blood should have been pouring from the stump where his hand had been sliced off but instead there was a slow

leak, dripping quietly onto the carpeted floor. He looked as though he faced a minor inconvenience rather than just been mutilated by his own wife.

He looked up, and there was no anger in his eyes, only a cold spark. A muscle worked in his jaw.

Neville tensed, not knowing what to expect. Would Malfoy hurt her? He didn't look pleased, to say the least. Despite the fear running through him, he prepared himself to intervene. The pause seemed to take an age but only a second or two had passed by—he could feel Pansy beside him, equally tense, as if she was mentally preparing herself to leap between her masters if she had to.

"I set a rule for you, my love," Lord Malfoy said slowly. He extended his good hand toward the floor, summoned its severed twin into his palm. "I thought I made it very clear when it was established that I expected you to keep to it."

"I told you before: I'm *tired* of your rules," Hermione snapped. One of her fists was clenched—she raised her other hand and Neville's eyes widened, seeing the deadly-sharp, long-clawed horror it had morphed into.

"If you get to have fun, then I should, too. I'll train you to behave, as you did to me."

Lord Malfoy's eyes were alight with some strange emotion—it made Neville's knees almost buckle. Was that *desire*?

What the fuck is going on, he thought, his gaze flying from the Lord to the Lady.

"I'm your devoted beast already, my love," Malfoy said. His tongue ran over his teeth. "You should know that well by now."

"Indeed," Hermione said. "Yet somehow you are *far* from domesticated."

She snapped her fingers, and as the others watched a black iron collar materialized around Lord Malfoy's throat. It looked quite solid and heavy—he didn't flinch as its weight bore down on his flesh.

He touched a hand to it.

"You are not to remove this," Hermione instructed sternly. "Or I will be very angry."

He hesitated, as if he wanted to make a retort—and then pressed his lips together.

"If you're going to lecture me on how I can only order you about in private, I don't want to hear it," she snapped. "That rule ends now, and you'll do as I say. It's only fair, and we *are* equals now, aren't we, darling?"

"Of course," Lord Malfoy said stiffly. "I'll follow your order, my Lady."

Neville watched it all with a strange, sadistic glee. Would have cheered if it didn't mean punishment. Lord Malfoy, collared like some mongrel, visibly displeased and humiliated in front of his own servants. It elicited about the same amount of joy as the first time Gryffindor had won the Quidditch cup when Neville had been all but eleven.

Careful, he reminded himself, and doubled his efforts to keep his expression from getting smug. He dared not look at Pansy or Luna, fearing that their reactions might crack his

composure.

Hermione turned her gaze to them now, her gaze sharp and dark. Neville's glee instantly withered.

"If he even *tries* to take it off, you'll let me know at once."

"Yes, my Lady," Pansy said at once, bowing her head. Neville and Luna followed suit.

Lady Hermione exited the room without another word, leaving the rest of them still standing in a stupor, with her husband staring after her, his icy eyes alight with either anger or lust or both.

Who would be the first to speak? Neville wasn't sure how to proceed. Would've been best to leave the room entirely, but knew that wasn't an option here.

"Shall I call for the Healer, my Lord?" Pansy finally asked. Her tone was mostly unaffected, but there was a slight waver of fear to it.

"No," Lord Malfoy. There was not a bit of pain in his voice—Neville couldn't stop staring at the injury. There was exposed bone, tissue, and muscle—he felt his stomach twist. The severed hand seemed to twitch a little at the fingers.

"There will be no need."

He held his severed hand to the stump, pressed them together. Neville frowned. His flesh *crawled*, knitting itself back together.

There was a sickening crunch—he twisted the hand—another crunch—Luna visibly flinched.

To their shock, the previously severed hand moved, flexed, wiggled its fingers. Lord Malfoy pulled back his sleeve to bare his forearm. There was no mark on his flesh anywhere to indicate what had just happened. It had all come together seamlessly. He winked at them.

Neville had seen a lot of strange, grotesque things throughout his life. But none of that came close to this. He couldn't stop staring at the Dark Lord's arm.

How is that possible?

Beside him, Luna gagged quietly, unable to suppress the urge.

Lord Malfoy presented his intact arm to them.

God have mercy, Neville thought. *This is so much worse than I ever imagined.*

And the thought finally stuck that they'd never stood a chance.

We gave up so much. All for nothing.

Lord Malfoy was standing now with his hands clasped behind his back.

"Pansy," he said. "Lovegood. Go tend to my wife."

After that display, Luna was certain she and Pansy needed more tending to than Lady Hermione did. But they exchanged a fleeting look and bowed, left the room silently.

The Dark Lord watched them go.

He turned to face Neville once they were alone.

“Did you enjoy the show?” he asked. The collar was still around his throat—it really did look immensely heavy. Neville could see the way it made an impression on the muscles beneath it.

Neville wasn’t sure how to respond. Malfoy saw that and laughed.

“What were you more surprised at, my wife, or I?”

“Both, my Lord,” Neville admitted. “I don’t understand.”

“Sometimes I don’t, either,” Lord Malfoy said, looking pensive. His hand came up again, touched the collar. He seemed... *proud* of it. “But I don’t mind. I didn’t think we would be blessed with new abilities when I made the Horcruxes—but I can’t deny they’ve made life so much more interesting.”

Hermione, Luna and Pansy put distance between themselves and the bedroom hastily, seeking privacy. They wound up in the empty kitchen.

That brief walk from the bedroom to the first floor had shaken off her fury somewhat—the red in her eyes was fading and her features were soft and human again. Most notably, her hands had reverted to their regular form.

Despite this, Luna kept a distance from her, too wary to come any closer. She had already witnessed her use the killing curse on herself without hesitation, and now had seen her morph her hand into that hideous claw and slice through bone and flesh like it was putty. It was extremely disturbing to think about, how unpredictable she had become.

Pansy, clearly not sharing in her trepidation, was feeling Hermione’s forehead.

“How do you feel?” Pansy asked.

“Fine.”

“He goes farther and farther,” Pansy muttered, shaking her head. “The fact neither of you can die doesn’t console me in the *slightest*.”

“I have the power to make him pay for it now,” Hermione said. “Even if I can’t kill him—I’ve accepted I’ll never find our Horcruxes. He’ll have been much too careful with where he’s hidden them. If I can’t kill him, I can at least try to weaken him as much as I can.”

“Would that even work, my Lady?” Luna asked. “Wouldn’t he still be able to recover due to his abilities?”

“Probably. But there’s a way around everything. If it means I have to cut off all his limbs to slow him down, I’ll do it.”

Lucio had been in the middle of telling a story to his playmates, with his arms outstretched and his animated face demanding their attention, until he caught notice of the movement by the door and he promptly forgot what he had been saying or doing, as his mother had just entered the room.

He ran to her and hugged her around the legs. Having been left alone for the rest of the morning, Lucio had been distracted during his lessons, worried that something had happened to his mother. When the other children had been dropped off he felt much better, but it was now upon seeing his mother enter the room that he felt best.

“Look, mummy,” he said breathlessly, pointing back at the other children, who had huddled into a tight ball and stared at Hermione, Luna, and Pansy curiously. “Flora showed us how to fold paper dragons out of paper!”

The other children proudly raised up their paper crafts. Flora beamed.

Seeing her, the children remembered themselves and followed suit, curtsying or bowing as Hermione approached.

“Hello,” she said, smiling as they straightened and stared up at her, a little shy. “Don’t those look lovely!”

That made them smile.

“I painted mine red because it’s my favorite color,” Flora announced, stepping forward.

One of the boys, Emmett, held up two that he’d made.

“Which one do you like best, my Lady?” he asked. Both were neatly folded, but the difference was in their color—one was green with a blue tail, and the other gold with a black tail and wings.

“Why, it’s hard to pick,” Hermione said, and then he thrust them both up at her.

“They’re for you!” he said excitedly.

“Oh—” touched, Hermione reached for them and then stopped.

“Wait,” she said. “Don’t you want to learn how to make them fly?”

Lucio’s eyes went round.

“Yes!” the others cried, raising their hands in the air as though they were in a classroom vying to be called on to answer a question. The sight was so dear Hermione couldn’t help but laugh. She neared the table.

“Alright,” she said. “Watch closely.”

As Lady Malfoy interacted with the children, Luna and Pansy watched silently from the other side of the room. Neither wanted to admit to the uneasiness behind Lady Hermione attacking her husband not too long ago, and now playing with children as though nothing were amiss. She looked and acted perfectly normal now, but they had seen how quickly she’d seemed to slip into that second skin, that deadly one.

Just how much control did she have over that part of herself? What else might trigger it?

Luna looked at Pansy, knowing she was thinking the same thing.

But what was there to be done? Lady Hermione had insisted she was fine and that she wanted to see her son, and wouldn't hear otherwise. They were here to obey, and so they'd followed her here. All they could do now was keep as close a watch as they could, and prepare for the worst.

[LATER THAT EVENING]

Outside, it had finally stopped snowing.

The protective charm he had cast over themselves had held up extremely well—neither of them felt the cold much, and no errant snowflakes had gone through the barrier. Luna was warm and soft in his arms, dozing lightly.

Neville stared up past the trees into a dark sky absent of color, his thoughts a tangled web. Moonlight filtered weakly through thick clouds.

They had discussed the dark Lord's offer again on the way here, deep into the forest.

"I want to get away from here," Luna had said, prompting the discussion. "As far as possible. I want to forget everything that exists here."

He'd looked at her, understanding her meaning. Saw the confirmation in her eyes. He hadn't expected her to change her mind so suddenly, but after what they'd witnessed that morning, he couldn't blame her.

There was no joy in the revelation. No relief, either, at the thought that they were finally in agreement.

As Neville and Luna took their respite outdoors, Hermione had wanted to have some time alone with Martin that evening after lunch, as she had learned he was still there but about to leave. First, and more importantly, however, she'd paid her portrait a second visit, and had left the room undetected by anyone a half-hour later. From there she'd made her way toward the library.

Draco ruined her plan by finding her in the corridor on her way there, blocking her path.

The collar had a dull luster to it. It looked rather good on him—she could imagine him as an escaped prisoner from Azkaban rather than the man who had single-handedly destroyed it.

Hermione stood still and let him come to her. He knelt at her feet, staring up at her with solemn pride.

She regarded his intact arm with mild interest.

"Back in one piece, I see," she said.

"If it displeases you, I'll cut it back off again," Draco replied, a slight smirk on his lips.

"No," Hermione said, eyes flashing. "That honor is *mine*."

Draco felt his stomach swoop, hearing her say that word in such a tone.

"You had every right to punish me," he said. "I deserved it."

"If you want me to not have any problems during this pregnancy, you need to behave yourself," she said. "I won't have this going wrong because you couldn't control your selfishness."

"Nor would I," he said. There was pure devotion in his eyes. "I'll behave, sweetling. I promise."

Hermione took his chin in her hand, caressed his cheek.

"I certainly hope so."

He wrapped his arms around her, gave her a scorching look. "Allow me to make it up to you, my Lady."

Hermione pretended to consider it.

"I'm tired," she said. "I want to take a nap. You can come with me but I'll take both your hands this time if you try anything else."

[A FEW DAYS LATER-AFTERNOON.]

Everyone was occupied, and Draco was away again. Hermione waited a moment after he was gone and then went straight to the library to find Martin.

He was back at his canvas, leaning in perilously close to work on the detail in the painting, and he didn't even notice Hermione enter until she'd wrapped her arms around him from behind, pressed her face into his back. He startled violently, trying to turn to see, and relaxed when he realized it was her.

"I'm sorry," she said, laughing a little. "I should have said something."

"No," Martin said, smiling, setting down his brush and palette. "That was a hell of a surprise. You really got me."

Hermione let him go so he could turn to face her. He was watching her, his eyes roaming her face. She wrapped her arms around him, clutching at his back, inhaling his scent. He was so warm. His arms were strong—not as strong as Draco's, but she still felt secure in them, and not to an oppressive degree.

Hermione trailed her nose along his throat—he shivered a little, his groin stiffening from her proximity and touch.

"I need you," she said. "Now."

His mouth was on her, his tongue working furiously to please her. Hermione gripped his shoulders, pressing her head backwards onto the chaise, fighting the cry that wanted to

release itself from her throat. He'd wound her so tight she felt like a wire about to snap and was on the verge of begging for mercy.

Martin's free hand trailed along her inner thigh, tracing patterns onto her flushed skin, moving over to squeeze her hip or caress her stomach. He had such a firm, satisfying grip—as deliberate as the way he held his brush. Hermione panted, felt her legs twitch as he flicked his tongue over her clit repeatedly, audibly. Desire spiked sharply again inside her. Her hands burrowed into his shoulders.

"Tell me you're almost there," Martin moaned, licking his lips. "Let me hear you say you want more."

"Please," Hermione whispered, her fingernails digging into his skin. "I want it all."

He resumed with his tongue and moments later Hermione came apart, covering her mouth to stifle her desperate cries. Her hips jerked under Martin's tongue and when it finally subsided and he sat up, she went limp for a moment, fighting to regain her breath.

Martin had lowered himself again to kiss his way up to her mouth—he left a trail of damp kisses along the way.

She reciprocated the kiss eagerly, wincing as he reached back down and gently teased at her clitoris with a brush of his finger.

His gaze was heavy on hers.

"Has my Lady had her fill?" he asked. Hermione felt another rush of wetness between her legs. "Is it time for your surrender?"

She sat up abruptly with a scoff, pushed him down by the shoulders until he laid with his back against the backing of the chaise.

"You're asking yourself that, right?" she asked, a daring gleam in her eye as she straddled him. Martin shivered with anticipation.

She rode him hard until her thighs threatened to give out, bouncing in his lap, her arms loose around his throat for balance. Martin could only hold on to her, his dazed eyes taking her in, his lips parted. She moaned, her head falling back, and he clutched her closer, nuzzled along her throat.

"Oh god," he uttered groggily, his fingertips digging into her flesh. He felt wrung out from within with pleasure, enthralled in the way she used him. He could never have guessed at the sheer hunger that burned inside her. She was like a woman possessed.

"You're mine," she whispered in his ear upon intervals when she slowed down. "Do you understand?"

He nodded. There was full submission in his eyes, and it pleased her.

"I'm yours," he replied hoarsely. "Completely, my Lady."

There was a flicker of movement to the right—Hermione glanced upwards distractedly, her eyes half-open in pleasure—and connected with Draco’s ice-cold gaze.

Her pulse stuttered in surprise, and she felt a swoop in her stomach, her body freezing of its own accord.

He was a short distance away, not even attempting to hide but watching in full view. Martin, with his back to his Lord, noticed nothing. His face was pressed into her breasts, his mouth wide open and devouring, his cock still helpless to the demands of her body.

Draco was still staring. He made no move to stop them nor to speak.

Hermione panted for breath, watching him warily, her face flushed but her eyes cool.

How long he had been standing there watching, she didn’t know.

Noticing that she had stopped moving, Martin briefly broke away from her chest to look up at her.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

Without a word, Hermione took his face and pressed him back into her breasts, arching herself into him so that he wouldn’t notice their visitor.

Then she resumed, grinding her hips down on her lover to fill herself. Her eyes refused to leave her husband’s, still unsure of his reaction... or lack of.

An electric current passed between their connected gazes. Hermione let her stare harden, challenge his.

I dare you to stop me, her eyes said to him.

His gaze was heated, glazing over in that way she recognized so, so well. Fury and lust, entangled with each other. Strangely, it magnified her pleasure—she couldn’t help herself and moaned breathlessly.

His voice finally came, grave and clear over the haze of pleasure in her thoughts.

Are you enjoying yourself, wife?

By way of answer, Hermione kept her gaze locked with his, making no attempt to stop or beg for forgiveness. What was there to be sorry for? She had his blessing to take on lovers. He had never said Martin was off limits. The only sin she had committed was to keep it a secret from him for so long, but Hermione refused to feel sorry.

She leaned forward, planting her hands on either side of Martin’s head, and worked her hips hard, rolling and grinding to mount the pleasure building inside her. Her breasts hung in his face—Martin hissed, groped her ass hard. She had been close before, and now, even with Draco’s gaze heavy on her, her pleasure peaked dangerously high.

She was not afraid, and she told him so with her gaze. He stood tall and broad with his hands at his sides, unclenched and relaxed. Hermione knew if she went to him and checked, she would feel his hard length concealed in his trousers. She gave him a knowing smile, and then let out a gasp of pleasure as Martin took hold of her hips to hold her still, and then began

to thrust upwards into her at a faster pace, driving himself deep with each thrust, rocking her in his lap.

Draco did nothing but stare back, his eyes only on her, on the bright flush on her face and the way her eyes closed and she came a second later, a soft wail coming from her mouth, her body convulsing.

“Oh, God—” Martin gasped—her cunt milked him steadily, driving any clear thought from his mind. He had no attention left to devote anywhere else but her, hadn’t at all sensed the other presence in the room. His balls drew tight and he used all his strength to wrap his arms around Hermione, and pull her down flush onto him so he could fill her well. He thrust into her one last time and she keened, her hips bucking in response.

“Yes,” Hermione whispered, trying to catch her breath. “Yes.”

Martin was still coming inside her—she could feel each pulse of his cock. Hermione sagged in his hold and let him cradle her to him, let him kiss her and murmur something into her ear. It all went unheard—she could still feel her husband’s stare until like a passing shadow, it lifted, and she opened her eyes.

Draco was gone.

She left Martin in the library after. He was packing up his things, about to leave for the day. She watched him quietly, thinking on how he had no idea how they’d been caught, how close he might have come to death had Draco’s rage surfaced. If he knew, what would his reaction be? Would he be shaking and pale? Or would he meet the threat bravely?

She thought of Draco’s cold stare. Though she was not frightened, she would be lying if she said she wasn’t apprehensive.

Would he break his promise? Did punishment await her at his hands? She couldn’t say. His end of the telepathic channel between them was dormant again—it would not do to initiate the discussion that way—this demanded a personal confrontation, and whatever came of it, she was prepared to meet him head on.

Finished tidying up his station, Martin straightened. His hair was askew and he half-heartedly patted it back into place. Hermione had already straightened herself up so that she was presentable again. She went to him, reached over to do up the buttons on his collar to hide the marks she’d left all around his throat. He caught her hand and kissed it—they exchanged a look, and after a moment broke away.

Should she tell him? Hermione debated this intensely as she walked Martin to the foyer. He deserved to know. But—she harbored a secret fear that he would stop the affair at once, regardless of her assurances that Draco could not interfere. She would not blame him—the situation was still extremely dangerous. But she had grown selfish, and wanted him to stay.

When Martin had Apparated away and she was left alone in the foyer, she steeled herself, squaring her shoulders.

Would he be furious? She had to go see him. She daren’t delay. Her insides fluttered a little with nerves, but there was no getting around it.

I'm no coward.

Then Draco's voice came into her head.

To the bedroom, he said. Now.

Hermione went straight to meet him. He was seated on one of the armchairs by the fire, watching her expectantly. His eyes were cold and calm. She did not sit in the other chair but went to him and sat in his lap before he had a chance to give the order.

It was the right move—approval gleamed in his eyes. His arms wound around her at once, securing her in his hold.

There was a quiet rage in his eyes as he looked at her, but it was only in his eyes, for the rest of his face was still as stone. Was it concealing the pain she knew he must be feeling—if he could still feel any at all?

"My darling wife," he said softly. "The *slut*."

Hermione smiled, unbothered. Traced her finger around the rim of the iron collar that still sat heavy around his throat.

"Don't forget, my Lord—I am *your* slut."

A flash of approval in his eyes.

"You gave me permission to take on lovers," she said. "You can't take it back now just because you don't like it."

He waited a moment before speaking.

"You know how possessive I am of you, little bird. I may be a tyrant, but I try to give you what it is you want."

"And I'm grateful," Hermione murmured, stroking his cheek. "So you can imagine what a betrayal it would be if you changed your mind now."

"I'm unused to the thought of another man knowing my wife," he said. "You outshine them like the sun against a single flickering candle. Neither is worthy of you."

Hermione traced over his bottom lip with the tip of her finger.

"Nor are you, yet here we are."

Now it was his turn to smile. His sharp teeth gleamed.

"You enjoyed the view," she said. Not angry or sly, but a little smug. "I saw it in your eyes."

"So I did," he said, and his tongue peeked out from his mouth to lap at her finger in one brief stroke. "My firebird, in the throes of passion, taking what she wants—who would find such a sight unfavorable?"

His hands were squeezing her tight—Hermione shivered, but not from fear or anger. He transferred the grip of one hand from her arm to her throat, but it was not painful or constrictive to her airflow.

He kissed her forcibly—not that she resisted—but the kiss was rough and wild, and he clutched her like he thought she might slip from his fingers. There was frustration behind every second of it.

He broke the kiss, panting, his eyes sharp and cold. His thumb pressed into the hollow of her throat, feeling her pulse.

“I simply prefer when *I’m* the one granted that stunning sight, when I’m the lucky soul you hold at your mercy. Vain fool that I am, I wanted it to stay that way forever.”

Feeling bold, for he was apparently not (yet) too furious, Hermione took the hand around her throat and pulled it free, measured it against her own hand.

“Don’t you think you’re being a little dramatic about this?” she asked. “Essentially, nothing has changed, Draco.”

When he didn’t reply for a moment, she looped her arms around his neck and leaned heavily into him so their faces were an inch from each other’s. He was stony-faced and still. She repressed a laugh and kissed the tip of his nose.

“Don’t be angry, Draco,” she said, a slight coddling tilt to her voice.

“Are you enjoying yourself, playing this game?” he asked. “That’s what it is, isn’t it? You’re toying with them to hurt me.”

“After a near decade of living under your control?” she mused. “Yes, Draco. I am enjoying it. I was a virgin in almost every sense when you put your claim on me. You can’t blame me for wanting experiences that don’t revolve around you. If it hurts you, I can’t bring myself to apologize. After everything you’ve done to me, I like to think I’m owed quite a bit of leeway to make up for it.”

“It was him you wanted all along, wasn’t it,” he said, a slight bend to his brow, his eyes boring into hers. “Not Theo.”

Hermione nodded.

“I should have seen that coming,” he said. There was no anger in his tone. “He’s a bit like Potter, after all—more to your tastes than Theo is.”

“He is the opposite of you,” Hermione said, taking Draco’s face in her hands. “That’s all I could ask for.”

“Do you love him?”

Hermione fought the urge to smile. The most powerful wizard in the world, suddenly so insecure. But he was still unpredictable. She would not goad him too much... yet.

“Love has nothing to do with this,” she said honestly. “I care for him. He pleasures me. But I don’t love him.”

That seemed to placate him only a little.

“I’ll have to kill him if you grow to love him,” he warned. “That goes to any future lovers, too. If you want to share your body, I can’t stop you, but I won’t have you sharing your heart, too.”

“Our agreement was that you wouldn’t interfere, Draco,” she said sharply.

“A line must be drawn somewhere,” he replied, gripping her arms tight. “I won’t have you sharing your love with anyone else.”

“I know better than to fall in love again, Draco. You don’t have to worry about that.”

She cupped his cheek in her hand and made him look at her. “You won’t harm him. I forbid you.”

“I won’t,” he agreed, his eyes cold. “*You’ll* be the one to do it. Intentionally or not. One day you’ll slip, and he’ll be reminded of what you are. Not human. Not normal. Just like me. And it’s not just with him—it’ll happen to anyone else you choose. He’s soft. Still human. Not equipped to deal with things like this. Do you think he’ll still love you then, when he’s seen the darkest parts of you?”

She knew the answer. Could not lie to herself that it would be otherwise. Still, she didn’t want to say it aloud.

“I’m not looking for love when I fuck him,” she finally said, a little heatedly. That much was true. “Theo is an amusement. But Martin makes me feel human again. It’s just a distraction, my Lord.”

Draco raised a brow. “For now, perhaps. Remember your heart is sworn to mine, Hermione. Don’t go giving it away to anyone else. Don’t make a mockery of my devotion to you.”

“You’re free to take your own mistress if it pleases you,” she pointed out, gripping his collar and pulling it towards her, so that he had to lean in close. “As many as you like. As long as they’re willing, of course. I wouldn’t hold it against you. I encourage it, in fact.”

His hands tightened around her.

“What for?” he asked scornfully. “Nobody could ever replace you. There’s no one else for me, Hermione. Ever.”

“So be it,” Hermione said stiffly. She took his hand and pressed it against her belly. “For better or for worse, Draco, the same applies to you: I couldn’t replace you if I tried. I have, and I’ve failed. I’m yours-and you’re mine.”

“So is Martin, from what I heard,” he said, the snark in his tone betraying his cool demeanor.

Hermione tapped a finger on his chin, silently scolding him.

“Petty behavior like this is unbecoming for a Dark Lord,” she said. “You think too highly of yourself, dearest. I don’t need your approval and that’s final. So learn to share, or I might just take you out of the rotation for a while to make you learn your lesson. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

She was fully gripping the collar now so they were nearly nose to nose and lip to lip. A red glimmer shone in her eyes. Draco’s entranced stare dipped from her eyes to her lips, a mere breath away.

It was pointless to resist. Especially when that wrath overtook her. He felt he was in some danger of succumbing to her too easily, but was too far gone to care.

“No, my Lady,” he said.

She smiled beatifically.

“Good boy.”

Author’s note:

We’ve playing fast and loose with the abilities that a Horcrux can potentially give a person. I always thought Voldemort’s abilities were kinda lame/not explored enough tbh. Considering Draco is such a vile person, and that he’s committed so many atrocities, I feel like all that and the rot inside him/his mind attribute to what the Horcrux made of him. He’s insistent on living for a long long long time so he’s gained abilities to heal/stop aging and imposed that on Hermione, too.

I also haven’t explained this enough bc lack of time and will but he can shift into different types of monsters and take on their abilities (hence the vampirism and the super strength). (That brief scene many chapters back where Hermione is falling asleep and thinks she sees a sort of tentacle extruding from him and reaching towards her? That wasn’t her imagination. Why does he hide it from her? Idk I guess he’s waiting for the right time to properly reveal it. Or he’s just a sicko and that’s his gleeful secret.) Hermione also got the ability to shapeshift because in the early years of her captivity she intensely and frequently wished she could change forms to hide from him. She can morph her hands or whatever other body part into deadly things to defend herself or attack because she also coped with her captivity by imagining the various ways she could kill him.

(One day I’ll do a one-shot exploring this stuff further. Perhaps I should have made the effort to do it properly before BUT I’m tired and nearly done with this and want to move on to other ongoing/new projects. This is so long already and it’s taken up too long to complete. I can’t explore every detail, unfortunately.)

Also I kind of picture Draco reattaching his hand like Ethan Winters does in Resident Evil 8 and 7. Just without the magic green potion lol.

1-2 chapters left depending on how I configure the drafts. Aiming to complete this by/before mid-July! Thank you for reading 3

32. The Crossroads (The End pt 1)

Another week passed and Hermione continued working diligently to maintain the lie. Faking the symptoms of a pregnancy was tricky business—she was more and more grateful each day that Pansy was there to help her.

At breakfast, she would sit at her place at the table, look at her food and gag from the smell, and Pansy would rush her out and to the bathroom. Draco often hastened to escort her himself but Hermione would wave him away, protesting that she was fine and didn't want to worry Lucio, who still hadn't been told the news. Lucio noticed this all going on but was assured there was nothing the matter with his mother, just that she was a little ill. He didn't seem convinced until Hermione took him aside and gently told him everything really was fine, and there was nothing to worry about.

Draco would have her food prepared with the utmost attention to detail, so that it suited her changing appetites. Any offenders were removed from her diet at once. He had Erik drop off vitamin-rich potions and pills upon his next visit, and reminded Hermione to take them every day before meals.

Just like when she had been pregnant with Lucio, Draco was more attentive than ever—always making sure she was warm and comfortable, always holding a protective arm around her shoulders, his hand on her lower belly, a glow in his face as he smiled at her. His sexual appetite ramped up even more, and it was a constant effort to keep him off her. He obliged most of the time, not angry but wistful instead.

Now that she was “pregnant”, there was no need to continue taking the fertility potions Erik had made for them, and Hermione gladly saw them put away. She continued secretly casting contraceptive charms whenever she could get away with it, praying the times that she couldn't, that the lie wouldn't become a reality. If luck stayed with her in any capacity, she hoped it would be through that channel.

Sometimes Hermione let him pleasure her with only his hand or his mouth, pretending to be too tired to do anything more. Draco was only too happy to pamper her, and didn't complain. And on the occasions she went to Martin and he noticed, he would say nothing. Only the red in his eyes and the frustration in his kisses belied his true feelings, but the collar still around his throat reminded him of his wife's threat, and his promise to obey her.

Regardless, he ate the lie up like a starved man, never once questioning her, though Hermione always acted with the utmost caution, half-expecting to be found out at any moment. He believed her so thoroughly, however, that Hermione knew she had to be very, very careful not to arouse any suspicions. She knew he was buzzing to boast the news to anyone with ears, but Hermione reminded him that she still wasn't ready to reveal it, that she wanted to wait a little longer.

So for the time being, aside from herself and Draco, only Pansy, Luna and Neville knew, and that was because they were in such close proximity to them that they were bound to learn the truth anyhow. Even Hermione had to agree that it couldn't be helped.

Draco, while being put out at the prospect of not being able to announce his victory to the world, obeyed his wife's orders dutifully, but he'd quite enjoyed sharing the news with the servants.

Pansy, who had known from the start thanks to Hermione's confidence, wore her most convincing smile and congratulated them both again.

Luna and Neville's reactions had been a little delayed. Draco had kept his eyes on them, soaking in the obvious dismay in their eyes that showed despite the fact that they were actively trying very hard to hide it.

Their congratulations were decidedly less earnest—but they *were* trying to fake their enthusiasm, at least, and Draco was in too great of a mood to snark at them over it.

There was much to prepare for. A new nursery had to be picked from the myriad of empty rooms in the manor and furnished accordingly, for he would not have Lucio and his development stunted by the overwhelming presence of a newborn. It would have to be in the same wing as Lucio's nursery, however, to facilitate things. They'd hired a midwife for Lucio's birth—he would look into hiring another. Last time Draco had insisted on a homebirth but this time around thought it would make more of a spectacle if he insisted Hermione go to Mungoe's. He would send an anonymous tip to the *Prophet's* reporters and have them swarm the place in hopes of getting the news or a photo firsthand to splash across the next day's paper. Due to the circumstances of the time around Lucio's birth, Draco had elected to keep his heir a secret until later on, and Hermione hadn't argued with him on that front. There had been a celebration the day he had finally presented his infant son to his followers, and while that had gone quite well, this time he would have fanfare. Let the news dominate society, that Lord and Lady Malfoy had welcomed another child to their legacy. He pictured it all with great anticipation.

Perhaps he would buy Hermione another necklace, too. Or a ring. No—both. He would have them outfitted with the most precious gems available, for his wife certainly deserved it. And perhaps he would expand the library here and add a display room so he could exhibit his two newest sculptures all the better. There was nothing in the world she did not deserve.

The estate Nott had handed over to him was still awaiting his thorough inspection. Draco had briefly considered having alterations done as quickly as possible in order to move there within the next year, but now with Hermione's condition, he supposed he didn't mind staying here for a while longer.

There was plenty of time for all of this, of course. There was no need to rush. But Draco was restless with excitement, both for his wife's condition *and* for the fact that his experiments with the painting project were slowly gaining ground.

So far he could only manage to partly transfer things into the painting he was experimenting with—a plain green landscape he'd bought with that intention.

Nott had done some digging on his behalf in the archives at the *Prophet* and at the Ministry of Magic, and found one article and name that might prove useful. There seemed to be no written record of such a spell, if it existed, but there was a man who had once made headlines in the *Prophet* eighty years ago by hiding in a painting inside of his home (quite unintentionally but used with great result a few times after) when some Aurors had come

round his home on suspicion of him committing fraud against Gringott's, which was indeed rare. When he had finally been found inside the painting, the case had made the news, and Draco supposed others might have taken an interest in such a spell, but nobody seemed ever to have committed to writing it down or publishing it.

The old wizard's mind was half-gone and he seemed to speak in circles, to Draco's frustration. But with the help of an Imperius, Draco gleaned the information he needed and was on his way home within the hour.

There was nothing quite like putting a puzzle together at last, and the whole image began to take form. Draco reckoned soon he would have it down completely, and then his needless suspicions would be comforted. Hermione seemed so content lately—why would she ever want to run away again? He figured it was the last thing on her mind, now that they were expecting again and since she had her power back.

Of course, it was always his own arrogance that blinded him. It had happened time and time again, and he had yet to learn. Hermione, when she was alone or with Pansy, could only think of her plan to escape, of every variable she had to consider along the way.

At night, with Draco's body curled around hers, she tried to sleep and often failed, her nerves always strung too tight, her thoughts always racing. She had a small window of time before she had to find a way to make the visible signs of pregnancy show and was at a loss for what to do. Sure, she could charm herself to create some sort of illusion over her stomach but wasn't entirely convinced they would hold up under his constant close presence and scrutiny. Draco could never keep his hands off her, and if she asked him to, then he would grow suspicious. The only thing she could do for the moment was to continue to eat in excess away from his prying eyes, and let her body fill out a little more for the time being. It was working, to her relief—the results were slow to appear but unmistakable—her belly became a little more rounded and soft, and her limbs thickened slightly. Such minute changes that Pansy hardly noticed until Hermione mentioned it, and she left to wonder if her own husband had yet to take note.

Erik had already come by to conduct two more evaluations since the hatching of the plan. Still under the web of Hermione's control, he went about the procedures without giving a single indication of deceit, and pleasantly confirmed to the Dark Lord that the pregnancy was going along just fine—they just had to wait and see.

Once, Hermione dreamt that it was birthing day already, and she was huge and round and strapped to the bed. Draco was there beside her, crouched with his head to her breast, his mouth latched around her nipple. A faceless midwife was between her legs, encouraging her to push.

She didn't need to. Hermione felt something slither out of her, and the midwife exclaimed in surprise and congratulated her, and Hermione looked up to see her holding a wet and slimy black serpent in her arms.

[A FEW DAYS LATER]

Lucio and Pansy exited the dining room, headed toward the nursery. Hermione had made to follow them but was impeded by Draco taking her hand and halting her. She stopped obediently, looked at him with an arched brow.

“Is something the matter, my Lord?”

“Nothing at all, sweetling,” he said, and in his eyes she saw that he meant it. It was strange to see him content for so long a period—well, as content as a monster truly could be—but she supposed with the current state of things he must be very well pleased, indeed.

To the point of smugness.

He had circled her a little, too fast for her to follow—Hermione turned warily, trying to track him.

“Have you given a thought to my offer?” Draco asked, wrapping his arms around her from behind. She jumped a little. He kissed her cheek, drawing her to him, put his chin over her shoulder. “To teach at my school?”

Oh. In truth, she’d forgotten all about it, prioritizing her own plans of escape over his overly optimistic vision of their future together.

If I get a teaching job, I want to earn it through my own merit rather than through my husband’s influence. He would be spying on me day and night there. What sort of privilege is that?

“I have,” Hermione lied. “I wanted to accept. But I think with the baby, I would want to stay home to raise it. I couldn’t bear to stay away from home, Draco.”

“We have Pansy and Lovegood to look after it,” he said dismissively. “They would take care of everything; you know that. You wouldn’t need to worry one bit.”

“I don’t want to raise my own children by proxy,” Hermione said. “I will be fully involved. If my career has to wait, then I don’t care. I have loads of time, thanks to your efforts.”

“So selfless, my wife,” Draco murmured, smiling. “So be it, then. Just know the offer will always be there for when you’re ready.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” Hermione said, a glint in her eye. “I’m grateful.”

His hands spread over her stomach, which was still barely showing.

“And have you been preparing your vows?” he asked.

She nodded. He murmured his approval, nibbled gently on her skin, over the delicate scar of his bite mark.

“And have you arranged to have a dress made yet?”

“I have, and if you’re angling for a preview, you won’t get one.”

He chuckled, his breath puffing over her clavicle.

“You can’t fault me for being curious, firebird.”

"I know you too well," Hermione said, turning in his arms so that she could face him, loop her arms around his neck. "And it's meant to stay a secret, so you'll have to wait."

"Very well," he said, feigning true disappointment. "But perhaps I can have a look at something else..."

His hands were creeping under her blouse, shocking her skin with his cold hands—she felt her nipples harden. He cupped her breasts, gauging their weight in his palms. His nose was buried in her hair, still a little damp from her bath that morning, and he inhaled. Hermione felt her legs weaken. His thumbs dragged back and forth over her nipples, teasing them relentlessly. Hermione moaned, reached back to press his face into her flesh, silently willing him to open his mouth and dig deep into her flesh, and mark her anew.

She froze.

"What is it?" Draco asked lazily, moving his mouth to her throat, sucking on a small patch of skin.

Her period had come again—a few days earlier than anticipated. She wore no underwear, and could feel it leaking down her leg, soaking into the thankfully dark skirt she wore.

"Something I ate," she said, thinking fast, and raised a hand to her mouth as if she thought she was going to vomit. "Forgive me, my Lord, I must—"

"Let me help," he said, reaching back for her.

She shook her head, dodging his touch, and rushed off in the direction to the nearest bathroom, barreling out of the dining room.

"Pansy," she heard Draco bark from behind her, and then heard Pansy speak faintly as she Apparated into the room.

"Assist her," she heard, just as she turned into the adjacent corridor.

Pansy appeared beside her at once, keeping pace though her eyes were alarmed.

"What's wrong, my Lady?" she asked. "What do you need?"

Hermione met her eye, not willing to speak aloud lest Draco was following them, and flicked her eyes down to her legs and then back up.

Pansy understood at once.

"Right," she said. They'd just come upon a bathroom and rushed in together.

Hermione charmed the door so no sound could filter through, and Pansy locked it for good measure.

Hermione caught her breath slowly, shaking her head as she cleaned herself off. Pulled her wand from her pocket to administer the charms Pansy had taught her on herself to hide all traces of her period.

"Did he notice?" Pansy whispered.

Hermione shook her head.

“He wanted sex,” she breathed. “I was about to give in. He would have caught me right then and there.”

Pansy sighed, relieved.

“Thank goodness that didn’t happen.”

Hermione could only nod in agreement.

When a few more weeks had passed in this manner of constant vigilance and secret meetings on both sides, Hermione decided it was time to take the next step.

She and Draco were in his study, and she was on his lap, the top half of her dress sitting around her waist, her skin flushed and damp from the efforts of his mouth all over her throat and chest. He had his face buried in her breasts, humming contentedly, his hands groping her appreciatively. The collar prohibited some of his movement but he never complained, and Hermione never offered to remove it.

They’d spent much of the morning after breakfast in his study. He had been rifling through that day’s copy of the *Prophet* before becoming distracted by the view her low-cut dress gave him.

His tongue flicked her nipple.

“What’s so amusing, my love?” he asked.

“Nothing, Draco. I just—I think I’m ready,” Hermione said, her hand on his shoulder, gently pushing him away so he could look her in the face. “To share the news, that is.”

He looked at her, pleased.

“Excellent,” he said. “When and how? I leave it in your hands.”

“The same day as the vow ceremony. We’ll have a feast right after. A celebration. And then the next morning we’ll send the news to the *Prophet*.”

The idea was highly appealing to Draco. He was nodding, captivated by the excited spark in his wife’s eyes.

“We’ll tell them all together,” he agreed. “What a brilliant idea, my love. Let’s summon Pansy so she and the others can begin the arrangements.”

After Pansy had been informed and Draco had finally let her go, Hermione slipped away to join Martin in the library.

He was not aware of her... condition, yet. She had wondered if it was a good idea to tell him. It was imperative to keep her secrets as closely guarded as possible. Though she knew she could trust Martin, she also knew Draco, now knowing of the affair, might take a fancy to ask him probing questions at any point if he couldn’t contain his jealousy. If the truth slipped out, then the game was up.

He would learn along with everyone else—perhaps it was unwise to let him find out in that manner, but to reveal the “pregnancy” to him now was too risky. And she *definitely* couldn’t tell him it was a lie, either. It was all too precarious. It might alter Martin’s behavior to the point of being noticeable, and if Draco found out, he would want to know why she had told the painter so early when they’d agreed nobody else would find out yet.

Whatever his reaction would be, she would watch carefully and make note of it, as Draco’s jealousy had taught her to always be wary of men. If Martin decided to break things between them... it would hurt, but she would respect his decision. She was not like Draco, would not force and enchant him to stay in spite of his feelings.

And if he became vindictive, what then? She doubted this would happen, but men were untrustworthy, and so she had to prepare herself for whatever outcome.

You think you know them and then they go and disappoint you.

Her heart had taken enough beatings. If it came to it, she couldn’t hesitate.

The cut has to be clean, she told herself. I can’t leave too many loose ends.

Neville, Pansy, and Luna were all occupied with preparations for the feast. At Draco’s insistence, it would be the grandest one the manor would host thus far, and he wanted every detail to be perfect.

Does he know he’s setting the scene for his own ruin?

Killing Draco had always been the top priority—one she’d had to shelve after his confession of making a Horcrux. Though she’d been working on casually searching the manor here and there without raising his suspicion as to its identity since she’d found out, Hermione still had no answer, and time was running out.

He had hidden it too well, and hers was probably locked up in the same place as his, ruining her chances of coming across them by accident. No matter how much she pleased him or begged to know, he would never tell her. He’d said as much. There was no point in still trying on that front.

So she’d turned to plan B: containment. And that was a harder riddle to crack. Draco was a powerful wizard, how could she hope to contain him if he could break out easily?

Azkaban was long gone, never rebuilt. A new prison had been built a year later, with supposedly tighter protection all around it and such, but being so new, it lacked the grim prestige Azkaban had once held. And of course, Draco had a hand (that is to say, a huge amount of gold) in its construction and funding.

He’s got too many friends in power to let me haul him up there, she thought bitterly.

She thought of Evander, who had let Draco essentially *buy* Neville for his own purposes. The ring of Aurors who had turned their backs and not protested as Draco had turned his Confundus charm upon them so they would have no understanding of the strange conversation that took place between Neville, Draco and herself. She thought of Nott, who worked high up at the Daily Prophet, and always saw to it that the narrative Draco wanted was always the one that was delivered to the masses. She thought of George, the silent

shadow who was sent out to spy on and intimidate or eliminate any enemies who might dare speak against them.

The roots of evil and corruption ran too deep. The only way to correct the problem was to tear it out at the source. To take out as much of it as she could, and pray that it would work.

[LATER THAT DAY]

“It’s time,” Hermione said to Pansy as they walked outside in the cold light of the afternoon.

Pansy looked at Hermione, solemn with understanding.

“We’re to have the vow ceremony and a feast afterward. There, we’ll make the announcement. We haven’t decided exactly when it’ll happen, but he wants it to be soon.”

Pansy nodded. Hermione’s eyes were intent on hers. “I want you out of harm’s way before then.”

Shivering, Pansy swallowed quietly. Hermione reached out and took her hand, grasped it tight. Pansy clung to her, and though her thick and heavy cloak had shielded her well from the cold, it was like she had been doused with ice-cold water. She felt it down to her toes, but did her best to ignore it, and met Hermione’s eye as confidently as she could, determined not to fail her.

“Yes, my Lady.”

After dinner that night, Pansy approached Lord Malfoy before he could retire for the night with Lady Hermione. He nodded at her request to speak in private and sent Hermione ahead to tuck Lucio in, and then he went with Pansy to his study—he shut the door behind her with a wave of his hand and then went to his desk.

“I believe I know what you want to tell me.”

“I’m ready to take my break, my Lord,” Pansy said, clasping her hands at her front. “I’ve decided it’s time.”

Lord Malfoy nodded, leaning against his desk.

“You leave at an unfortunate time—you know our plans for the coming weeks.”

“I do,” Pansy said, “and I hope you don’t see it as a slight—I just thought sooner was better than later. I’ve seen milestones enough in this place—now I should go and reach my own.”

“Very well,” Draco said. “The timing is a shame, but I won’t hold you back after I made that promise to you. At the very least, you’ll be back with us by the time Hermione gives birth. I suppose Longbottom and Lovegood have learned the ropes around here by now. You’ve been nothing but loyal since you came here, Pansy. You’ve earned my trust and I hope

during your time off, you don't hesitate to contact me if you need anything. I'll be more than happy to help—as long as you can guarantee me you'll return when this break ends.”

“Of course, my Lord,” she said, for it was clear he would accept no other answer.

He reached behind himself and Pansy heard a heavy *thud*. He brought his arm forward and held out a heavy sack full of what she presumed had to be money.

She had already been paid for the past month a few days prior. Pansy looked at him, puzzled.

“A bonus,” he said, a quirk to his lip. “For you to use however you wish.”

A bribe, more like, Pansy thought, her head spinning.

He already paid her handsomely for her work—not that she had any time to spend it. She had a staggering amount of gold already in her vault, just lying there and collecting dust. He provided room and board and food, any other essentials she might need, and never took the expenses from her pay. Sometimes she'd wondered why he bothered paying her so highly if she never had the opportunity to spend it. If her service was for life, she was no better than a slave here really—he deposited the gold into her account to give the illusion that this really was a great position, as if he didn't work her to the bone and subject her to horrors beyond most people's comprehension.

Well, it would come in handy now, whatever happened beyond this point. If Hermione's plan worked, they would be set up for years to come. The transfer of most of Pansy's funds to a new, account at a separate bank (under a false name) was already underway, for it was important not to leave a trail through which the Dark Lord might find them easily.

But she bowed deep and accepted the gift, for to refuse it would incite his suspicion, as he would take it as an offense.

“You're most generous, my Lord,” she said, adjusting the sack in her arms. It was quite heavy—she could indeed feel a wealth of coin inside, shifting with each of her movements. “Thank you.”

He pushed off from his desk and came forward to stand before her.

“I take care of what's mine,” he said, and her blood ran cold. She thought she should be used to those cold, pale eyes by now after all these years, but they were still unsettling, especially when he got this close. She'd seen many people with eyes like that before—not quite blue, not quite grey but somewhere in-between. But none of them came close to the Dark Lord's, for his eyes seemed to hold a power of their own that seemed to suck you in even if he only glanced at you for a fraction of a second. Their pull was impossible to resist. Pansy was sure even if she never saw him again, she would never find an equal to that gaze.

“And everything that's in this house or bears my mark, I regard as such,” he continued. “Remember the oath you took when you first entered my service. I trust you to uphold it even when you aren't here—I won't have any secrets spilled.”

“I wouldn't dare,” Pansy said, feeling a bit like she was being lectured by a very stern father. The sack of money was so heavy it threatened to drag her down—she felt it slipping down her hold and cast a silent charm to make it weightless.

"I trust you," he said. "And as of now you're a free witch to do as you please. I won't lie: I'll miss you. But I think Hermione and Lucio will miss you most."

Pansy flushed. She hoped he wasn't expecting her to say she would miss him as well, for she certainly wouldn't. The only thing she would miss was knowing what was happening here, for she feared the mystery of being away from the manor would rend at her patience and peace—if she managed to get any at all.

"I believe so, too."

"Well, go and enjoy your time away," Lord Malfoy said. His mouth widened into a sharp smile. Pansy bit back a gasp.

"The time will fly by faster than you believe. I'll see you again soon."

Not sure what to say, Pansy gave another deep bow, careful not to spill the contents of the sack.

"Goodbye, my Lord."

And then with him still standing there and watching her, she left the room, her skin crawling all the way back to her own quarters.

There was no one along the way there, and she was glad, feeling almost *shameful* as she went.

Though he'd proclaimed her a free woman, she felt no different—knew she wouldn't until she had put enough distance between herself and the manor. The bag of money in her arms only added to her disquiet. She would tuck it away with her luggage and deposit it quickly once she got out of this godforsaken place, and try to forget about it.

No gold coin that crossed his hand was clean, she knew that very well. Perhaps it was immoral to take bribes or gifts of any sort from any person so evil, but they would need the money and Pansy felt it was only right they took as much as he offered, if not more. Hermione had already seen to that with the secreting away of her own valuables to hide at her parent's home. After everything he'd done to them, it seemed only fair. A few bag of gold and jewels weren't enough to undo all that damage—especially not in Hermione's case. And though it would perhaps leave the smallest of dents in his wealth, it still made her feel a tiny bit better to take it, for she had no intention of fulfilling her promise to return.

Malfoy had never referred to her as one of his possessions before. She'd never thought he counted her as anything else other than a servant. To hear him call her 'his' made her face go pale, her hands clam up.

Suppose it doesn't work? She thought to herself, shutting the door to her quarters silently. *His last words sounded like a taunt—could he know?*

The sack lay unopened on the floor beside her where she stood leaning against her door.

She toed at the canvas, prying it open.

A large mound of galleons winked up at her in the cozy firelight of the room.

Gracious.

A bribe, indeed. The look on his face had told her *there's more where that came from... as long as you stay faithful and come back.*

As if she even had a choice! Her oath would not allow otherwise—that was where Hermione had promised to intervene, to set her free.

Pansy closed her eyes, tried to steady her breathing, to summon her courage like armor around herself.

It will work, she said to herself. It will. We'll all be free. You'll see.

Her luggage was packed and ready, taking up quite a bit of space across her quarters. Pansy had written ahead to her family to expect her the following day, as she would set out early in the morning, all those suitcases shrunk down to fit inside her travelling bag.

Her bed was made up, waiting for her to get in and rest. Pansy looked at it and knew she wouldn't be able to sleep much if at all that night.

She took a brief nap first. Only twenty minutes. Then she sat and checked all her things again, making sure she left nothing of value behind, that everything was orderly. It felt so strange, to look around at this place where she'd lived for so many years and wonder if she would see it again. If the plan worked, she never would. If it did, she would be dragged back here by the power of the oath she blindly took all those years ago. And Hermione, and Lucio—what of them?

There were too many possible scenarios playing out in her mind—Pansy shook her head and went over the plan again. It was not a perfect one—but she and Hermione had put it together as well as they could within the limitation set around them. Neither had written it down, for it would be a catastrophic mistake if it should be found by anyone else—they'd spent many a walk outside going over it in as much detail as they could until each had it memorized to the letter. A plan so tenuous—like a withered leaf floating in a pond—any series of even the smallest ripples could send it so far out of its original trajectory, rendering it useless.

“You're leaving, then,” Neville said.

It was midnight by now and Pansy had summoned him and Luna to meet privately in her quarters. They had looked alarmed, and she knew they had suspected at once that something had happened between the Dark Lord and his Lady, but she set those worries to rest at once and then explained her situation.

An uncomfortable prickle itched at Pansy's temple now. The look on his and Luna's faces would haunt her—that realization that they would be left alone here. But what could she do? It would be an incredibly stupid move to even offer to bring them along.

“Yes,” Pansy replied. “I've worked here for several years now without a vacation. Lord Malfoy finally granted me one.”

“Good for you,” Luna said earnestly. “You deserve it.”

"I wish it hadn't come about like this," Pansy said, her mask breaking as genuine sadness crept across her face. "I do feel incredibly bad, leaving you both here."

"Don't," Neville said. "We know what we're in for. We're ready." And his lip quirked up at the corner. "You trained us well."

Pansy frowned. They were both of them remarkably brave (had to be, to have come this far), or they knew something she didn't.

"You know your duties by now," she said, and they nodded. "You've both done really well so far. Lord Malfoy is pleased with you both. He can be very generous—he might change his mind about his plans."

The two of them exchanged a look—Pansy realized at once what that meant.

"He already has, hasn't he?" she asked, surprised. "Of *course*."

"Well," Luna said frowning. "He says it's our choice what happens next."

"Have you decided?"

They looked at each other again—Luna gave a hesitant nod.

"I think so," she murmured. "I hope so. One day we think we're sure, and then the next we go right back and question ourselves. But I think we know what we've got to do."

"Does Lady Hermione know?" Pansy asked.

Neville shook his head. "Will it change anything, to tell her?" he asked.

Pansy sighed. "I don't know. But if she could help you, I'm sure she would."

Neville looked dubious on that front.

Pansy didn't want to push any further. She clasped her hands together, cleared her throat.

"Good. Well, I hope I see you both again when I return," she said awkwardly. It was both the wrong and the right thing to say. "Or—I hope that we all find peace."

That felt better. Somewhat. But what else was there to say? She knew she was looking into the eyes of a doomed couple, and it stung her heart. Whatever their choice was, she dared not interfere too much. The main priority was Hermione's plan. It must go without flaw. Any deviations had to come at Hermione's own discretion.

Neville smiled. It was strained, but honest. There were tears in Luna's eyes.

"I do, too," she said, and then hastily wiped at her eyes. "I suppose in your absence, we'll be in charge."

Pansy nodded.

"I have every faith in you," she said.

Neville came forward and held out his hand.

Pansy looked at him, confused.

“Thank you for taking care of her all this time,” he said, his eyes a little wet. “For being a friend to her when she had no one else. I know you love her as much as we do... or did. I was wrong about you, and I’m glad.”

Suddenly the room blurred around her, and Pansy struggled to swallow. Though Lord Malfoy’s praise had been high, indeed, it had not touched her at all, but this was different.

She reached out to take his hand and felt him grasp and shake it. She nodded, her throat tight.

“I wish I didn’t have to leave you both here.” She could barely choke out the words. “I’m so sorry.”

Luna came forward now.

“Shhh,” she said softly. “Come here.”

Pansy accepted the embrace, blinded by tears. The mask was fully off. She felt herself trembling.

“Don’t worry about us,” Luna repeated quietly into her ear. “We’ll be fine, I promise, though it’s sweet of you to worry. Go enjoy your freedom. We’ll look after Hermione while you’re gone, not that she needs our protection.”

Pansy huffed with laughter. They broke apart slowly.

“Thank you,” Pansy said, smiling, a little sheepish. “I’m sorry, I’m usually more composed than that.”

“We’re not under his eye right now,” Neville said. “And you’re free. You shouldn’t feel the need to hide.”

Pansy nodded. He was right. It was going to take some time to get used to. In all these years of servitude and vigilance, she’d nearly forgotten what it was like to live one’s life freely, with unabashed display of emotion or choice of words.

“She’ll always have me to look after her,” she replied quietly. “Oath or not. I promise.”

There—that was as much hint as she could give them. They looked puzzled now.

“And Hermione—she isn’t fully gone. Not yet. Lucio is the key.”

Lucio was agitated about it when she told him the news early the next morning, but being a brave little soul, managed to hold back the worst of his feelings. Hermione, knowing he would be distraught, had sent word to his tutors that there would be no lessons that day, but Lucio could not even relish that freedom, for he’d begun to cry once the realization fully sank in that Pansy would be gone for several months.

“You’ll come back, won’t you?” he asked in that darling, childish voice. Pansy held him tight in her arms and Hermione watched from the window nearby. “You won’t forget about me?”

"I could never," Pansy said, smiling. "I don't think I'll ever make another little friend like you. Now now, don't cry so much, dear. I'll send you a letter one of these days and I hope you'll write back and tell me how you are. Do you promise?"

He nodded, cheered a little at the thought.

"I promise."

"Good," Pansy said, trying to hold her tears back behind her smile. "I'll send you a photograph of where I go next, so you can see. Maybe you'll even come visit me."

Lucio looked up hopefully at his mother, who smoothed his hair and smiled at him.

"Of course we will," she said.

"Will Luna and Neville look after me now?" Lucio asked.

Pansy nodded.

"Yes. I trust they'll do a very good job. I think you'll like them now that you'll get to spend more time with them."

Lucio looped his arms around her neck and gave Pansy a watery kiss on the cheek.

"I'll still miss you," he said. "But I hope you have fun. Goodbye, Pansy."

And he sniffled one last time.

Pansy hugged him tight.

"Thank you," she said. "We'll see each other again sooner than you think, Lucio. Don't be scared."

She let him go and he stepped away, watching her with those bright blue eyes.

"Pansy's got to get going now, darling," Hermione said to her son. "We can't keep her here all morning."

Neville Apparated in at her summons and bowed, then straightened and surveyed the scene.

"Prepare my son for a day out," Hermione said. "We're going to go to down to the village."

Neville nodded and looked at Lucio, who had reached up for his hand.

He looked at Hermione. She nodded. Neville took the boy's hand and escorted him from the room. Lucio waved to Pansy sadly just before he went out of view.

Pansy wiped at her eyes with a quick motion.

"Sorry," she said. "I tried to hold it in."

Hermione went to her, took her hands in her own. They looked at each other for a moment before Hermione began to speak.

"You're the only friend I've had in a long time," Hermione said in a half-whisper. "The only person I feel I can totally trust here. I'm sorry this is what it took for us to become

friends, but every day I'm grateful for you."

Pansy had closed her eyes, tears tracking slowly down her face.

"I'm sorry you became part of this mess," Hermione continued. "I know it was your own decision, but nobody should have to be made to participate in Draco's cruel game. I'll do everything I can to make sure you're truly free, regardless of if I manage to escape or not. I owe you so much—"

"You owe me *nothing*," Pansy said suddenly, passionately, "except the satisfaction of me seeing you live the life of your own choosing and away from *him*. But don't do this for my sake—do it for yours, and your son's."

Hermione came in close and kissed her cheek.

"We do deserve that," she said. "All *three* of us."

Pansy nodded, her eyes now open, taking in Hermione's expression. There was a fire in her eyes and a determined set to her body language that helped flare the flame of hope brighter inside her.

"We know the plan," Hermione said. "This may be our last chance. I'm counting on you, Pansy."

Pansy squeezed her hands tight.

"I won't fail you."

"If this doesn't work, then I don't want you to feel any guilt, or to think even for a second that I'll be angry with you," Hermione said. "I would never do that to you. I'll accept the results for myself whichever way they end up, but Lucio *must* be free. Whether we see each other again or not, I want to thank you. For everything."

She cleared her throat—her voice had cracked.

"Draco brought you here to spy on me, to watch me closely to make sure I didn't try to hurt myself again. I had no say in it. When he told me, I was determined to hate you. I wanted to die more than I've ever wanted anything else, and it was your job to stop me."

Hermione wiped at her eyes.

"I thought you an enemy, and you came to be like a sister instead. You helped bring me back from the cliff I stood on. I can never thank you enough for that, or all the other ways you've saved me since. So even if the plan fails, and only you and Lucio get free, that will still be victory enough for me."

Her voice trembled a little.

"I'm sorry to burden you with the task of looking after my parents and Lucio in case I can't, but I need to know they'll be alright."

"It's the least I can do," Pansy said. "I *want* to do it."

Hermione nodded, and a tear slid out from her eye to trail down her cheek.

"You're an angel, Pansy," she said, smiling. "I couldn't do this without you."

They hugged tightly, the seconds dwindling past, counting down to an inevitable crossroads.

Pansy left the manor at ten, Apparating directly from the foyer. The Lord, Lady, and their son were there to send her off.

Pansy, her bags tucked safely away in her purse, mustered her most convincing smile, tried to feign excitement.

Lord Malfoy met her eye, and he nodded to her, a downward motion of the head, as if instructing her to remember his words from the night before.

Lucio waved, crying, unable to stop himself.

Pansy tapped her chin and he held his head up. His father and mother had a hand on each of his shoulders. One gripped too tightly, in reprimand—the other held to comfort.

Finally, Pansy looked at Hermione.

There was such a look of love in her eyes that Pansy almost ran to her, suddenly unwilling to leave her behind. The mere act of Apparating might hold potential splitting risks to the human body, and Pansy had never once had it happen to her, but this time she suspected it might leave half her heart behind, for Hermione had been right—they were as good as sisters to each other. Not in the traditional way, certainly, but circumstances had pushed them together and they'd coped and bonded together for years in what ways they could. Uneven in positions they might be, but there was no way around it. One couldn't always choose how relationships formed. It was just the way life was.

It was too dangerous to reciprocate the look with her eyes whilst the Dark Lord was in audience. The best Pansy could do was blink deliberately at Hermione, and in the next instant, she was gone, the manor and all its ghosts whirling away from view, sucked into the black.

Sometime around this period, Martin completed Lucio's portrait. He hadn't meant to complete it so fast, but capturing the boy's spirit was a strange, joyful task. The portrait was possibly his best work yet. It was presented to the Lord and Lady and their son, and garnered approval—as warmly as it could be bestowed by the Dark Lord himself.

The boy peered at it and shivered a little, not seeming to like seeing himself rendered quite so large and in detail. Lady Hermione patted his curly head sympathetically, knowing the feeling too well.

The next day, Martin dutifully began the next portrait—one of the Malfoy family all together. They posed for him those first few days so Martin could gather his initial sketches and references.

Hermione sat in an ornate armchair, Draco standing tall behind her, his cold hand heavy on her shoulder, his stare once again victorious and arrogant. Lucio stood on her other side, his

arms folded behind his back, his gaze guarded and solemn to the viewer.

Martin had noticed Hermione's mood seemed lighter that day—she needed no coercion to smile for the family portrait, and even Draco remarked on it, pleased. She had only replied that while she hated posing alone, posing in a group wasn't as terrible. Which was true—but not the true reason for her relaxed state.

Draco had chuckled at her response. Martin continued to work steadily at his easel, staring at them with his analytical eye, careful not to look at Hermione in the eye too much while the Dark Lord was there watching closely. Lucio had stared off toward the windows wishing he could go play outside.

Hermione saw Lucio's longing and made no comment about it. Draco's thumb brushed against her skin and she let him, enjoying sitting there for a portrait she knew would never be finished.

Two weeks after Pansy's departure from the manor, Hermione received the first post she'd ever received from the outside the manor (that wasn't from Draco himself) since becoming a Malfoy.

Neville brought it to her that afternoon, and from the front of the envelope it was clear who it had been sent from. He had not inspected it, as he should have done, but he had no way of knowing that. Pansy had not mentioned such a rule to him before she left, as it was so rare for Hermione to receive post. The magnitude of such a sudden letter passed him like a subtle breeze. Not even Draco had enforced this rule much during all these years, being the only one who had his post taken to his study every day. Hermione simply never got letters or anything of the sort, and it had been a fact for so long by this point—a fact that Pansy used to their advantage. Doubly so, since the wards around the manor recognized the trace of her magical signature on the letter, and raised no alarm.

Draco was busy in his study, and Lucio and Luna were in the nursery. Hermione took the letter to the bedroom at once and read it in secret.

I've found a nice place to stay for a while, and my old friends are very happy to stay with me a while and have been asking so many questions about where I'm from, and why I'm alone, wrote Pansy. I've been telling them in pieces, since it's too much to divulge at once. They can hardly believe it, but they do remember more than I thought they would, which is a surprise.

It's been so much work making sure this place is fit enough to live in after being so used to the splendors of Malfoy Manor. I think so far I've done a good job making it into my new home.

I bought a camera recently to document my adventures during this vacation, and I've included some photos I took of the sunset a few days ago—vivid and bleeding all over the sky. I wished I wasn't alone to see it. Please show them to Lucio, I'm sure he'd like to try drawing it with his watercolors.

I can't pretend to miss the manor, only that I miss certain people inside of it. I hope all is well inside, and that you come visit me at your earliest convenience.

There were two photographs included in the envelope, carefully contained in a separate envelope. There was a subtle glimmer of magic about them. Hermione took this smaller envelope and hid it in the nursery when it was empty later that night, all without having looked inside it once.

Hermione wanted to save the letter, to save herself an ash of comfort, but the risk of Draco finding it and seeing through its code to its true meaning was too high. She took it to the fire and burned it, sending a silent thanks out to Pansy, wherever she had landed. She had done her part—not that Hermione had held any doubt of her success.

Half the plan was crossed off already. That was thrilling to know... but there was still so much to be done.

With the assurances of the letter, Hermione knew it was time to take another step forward.

“Hermione,” Draco gasped. “Yes, sweetling—*ungh*—”

His come spurted down her throat. Hermione kept him pinned against the bedframe, her hands pressing down on his hips as she swallowed down eagerly, moaning. He was shaking, sweating under her body, his eyes starry and deliciously helpless, and he was hot and taking up her mouth entirely so that it was a struggle to breathe but that made it all the more exciting—Hermione felt him pump one last time into her and let him slide from her mouth and then let herself drag in great lungfuls of air, fighting not to choke.

Released from her heavenly torments, Draco sagged against the bedframe and regarded her in amazement, his cock now limp and the twin punctures in his throat still fresh and oozing.

“Firebird,” he panted. “Thank you.”

Hermione smiled, licked her lips clean. He was all she could taste and it was not unwelcome. Before he could move again, she crawled forward and atop him, settled against his chest. His hands, still restrained above his head and pinned to the headboard, strained lightly against their binds, wanting to hold her, but Hermione made no move to release him.

She put one hand above his heart, feeling his pulse.

“Have I pleased you, my Lord?” she asked.

“Let me free, firebird,” he said in a hoarse voice. “Let me return the favor, won’t you?”

“In a moment,” she said, her fingertip tapping against the iron of his collar. “I was thinking it’s time to share our happy news.”

He was still flushed and spent, regarding her with affectionate eyes.

“Tell me the day, sweetling, and we’ll settle the preparations for then.”

And so the date was set. The Vow ceremony and the feast were to take place on the same day in two week’s time—enough to allow her time for any final preparations she might need,

for as desperate as she was to get it over with, she knew it was unwise to run headlong into it without feeling she was truly ready.

Invitations were to be crafted and then sent out—a formality they only bothered with for really important occasions (such as the announcement of Lucio’s birth). This was a task Pansy normally undertook on her own, but now that she was gone, Luna and Neville were ordered to do it, and they were given a few days to get through it, for Draco’s followers were numerous and they had to compile a lengthy list of names.

Though the task was odiously long, neither one complained—it was a lot more entertaining than standing inside Lord Malfoy’s office and bearing with his cold remarks, or guarding the master bedroom by standing outside the door, forced to listen to whatever went on within.

Pansy had warned them from the start to expect such an ordeal. She said the Dark Lord didn’t do it as often as he used to, which they ought to be glad about. Neville had only done so a handful of times since he’d entered the manor, but a warning couldn’t entirely shield the blow. Luna tried as best as she could to mentally block off the sounds of the Lord and Lady together in their bedchamber but wasn’t always successful. If Neville was stationed there with her, he would hold her hand and hold it tight if he sensed she was struggling.

It was hard to hear that and know her old friend was there enjoying what she had once hated, what she had once never consented to. She held no judgement toward Hermione, and reserved all her hatred for the Dark Lord, who would emerge from the room and greet them with a smug glint in his eye in the mornings.

Every inch of the house was saturated in that aura of unpleasantness and suffering—the only area exempt of that was the nursery and she was grateful, for now that Pansy was gone Luna had to fill her role in taking care of the boy, and spending any amount of time inside that large room quickly undid any tension that grew outside of it.

She and Neville took any opportunity they were given (at the end of the day, when the majority of their work was over and they had been dismissed) to put the manor behind them even if for an hour, and take refuge in the forests surrounding the place. There, their time was their own, and they spoke and acted without (much) fear of being watched or repercussion, for they knew that the Dark Lord didn’t care what they did on their own time as long as they didn’t break his rules.

It was a strange thing, to live so cut-off from the world as they’d known it. The Dark Lord didn’t allow them to see his newspapers, and there was not even a radio in the manor to glean any current outside events from. It was as though they lived in a realm of its own with a tiny population, where the only things that mattered were what happened inside—leading Neville to often wonder *why* Malfoy bothered at all with keeping such tight control and influence on the world outside the manor if he spent so much time here within his own realm.

That Hermione was pregnant shouldn’t have shocked them—Malfoy had made it clear he longed for another son openly and repeatedly, and it was also no secret that the pair had sex very often. But it *had* been a shock to see Hermione share in the Dark Lord’s joy. It turned Neville’s stomach, to see them together, so blissful and wicked.

That’s not Hermione anymore. Remember that.

The only thing to do was to accept Lord Malfoy's offer and earn their own freedom. A laughable notion, for as long as Malfoy remained in power, Neville knew they'd have no true peace. Only the illusion of it. The Dark Lord would always demand something of them to prove their loyalty. He'd taken George's eye, for fuck's sake! George was used to it by now and seemed amused by his and Luna's horrified reactions. Neville couldn't imagine such a fate, unable to block the Dark Lord's interference if he decided he wanted to see through him at any given moment regardless of what he was doing. And then there was the fact that he could somehow communicate telepathically with Hermione—would he find a way to impose that upon others? There was no telling what he might do, and it chilled him.

What might he take from them that he hadn't already?

Luna had also raised that point, and they'd stared at each other in silence, wondering if it was even worth it to try.

The banquet room, seldom-used inside the manor, was opened up and dusted off. Its capacity was much larger than the dining hall which was good, for judging by the amount of invitations Neville and Luna had completed thus far, every bit of it would be used up.

The list of names was staggering, and a good deal of them were unfamiliar to Neville and Luna, which came as no surprise, considering just how many of their peers had perished in the war or been murdered afterward by one of Malfoy's people.

Lady Hermione's dress for the Vow ceremony arrived a couple days later and was taken into the master bedroom and hidden with the aid of some protective spells, for Hermione had warned them that Lord Malfoy might want to ruin the surprise and look at it before the day.

Neville had asked the Dark Lord if he would not want to custom-order his own clothing for the event, to which he had replied that his wife would be the one commanding everyone's attention, and nobody would notice if he wore a million-galleon suit and robes encrusted with diamonds. And it was better that way, he'd said with a winning smile, for nobody should detract attention from his wife.

Luna was still in the nursery with Lucio, helping him go over the assignments his tutors had left him for the following day. Neville was standing in the nearest corridor with nothing to do. Lady Hermione was currently occupied in the library with the painter, and when those doors were closed Neville knew it was time to make himself scarce. Now that Malfoy knew about them both, there was no reason to give her warning if her husband was approaching, as once had been Pansy's job.

He'd told Neville one day in his study, his face devoid of expression, but Neville could sense the anger coursing through the Dark Lord.

Despite his inner glee, he couldn't lie when the Dark Lord's sharp gaze turned to him.

"Did you know?" he asked. "Did she ask you to keep it a secret from me?"

"I found out by accident, my Lord," Neville said deferentially, forcing an air of seriousness about himself. "Pansy was with me."

"Oh, she *must* have known."

“She might have,” Neville acknowledged, “but she told me it was Lady Hermione’s own business and it wasn’t my place to share her secrets with anybody.”

Lord Malfoy studied him for a moment.

“Then Luna didn’t know.”

“I couldn’t tell her, my Lord. She found out on her own later.”

Lord Malfoy clenched his teeth. A muscle worked in his jaw and his eyes flashed.

“I allowed my wife her freedoms,” he said, more to himself than to Neville. “To make her happy. I can’t take it back though I’d like to. But someone must pay for my displeasure.”

His words had no sooner left his mouth than Neville found himself on the floor, crippled by pain so bright that it clenched up his jaw and his throat so he couldn’t even scream—the only sound that emitted from him was a surprised grunt. His whole body locked up in response to the Cruciatus but his eyes remained open and unable to blink, staring up at the Dark Lord who looked down on him impassively, his hands held behind his back.

The only thing that could distract him from the pain and the feeling that he was on the verge of a gory combustion was keeping up a stream of obscenities hurled at the creature standing above him. What did it matter if he could tell, or even somehow hear them? Nothing could be worse than this current pain. His hands spasmed uncontrollably, fingernails tearing at the carpet below him.

It stopped suddenly—Neville’s mouth opened with a gasp to drag in air and his whole body went limp. There was an intense pain in his ribcage as he panted for breath.

“It’s a shame,” the Dark Lord said, no emotion in his voice. “That’s as high as I can make it go without killing you, or scrambling your brains. Tempting though it sounds, I must have you in working order for the time being.”

Rage burned at Neville, as white-hot as the Cruciatus had felt. But he kept his voice flat as he cleared his throat and replied.

“I’m at your service, my Lord.”

Lord Malfoy laughed.

“What you should be doing right now is *thanking* me on your knees for not pushing it that far. That wasn’t even the smallest amount enough to satisfy my anger, but I’ll suppose it’ll do. For now.”

I hope you’re rotting from the inside with jealousy, you smug prick, Neville thought, unable to control his shaking. *I hope it eats at you every second, knowing that she prefers someone else.*

On the other hand, perhaps it was best not to wish such a thing, even on his worst enemy, for it had been his intense greed and jealousy that had landed them all here within this manor.

But he got himself onto his knees and went prone on the floor, his palms flat on the carpet and his head bowed down.

“Thank you, my Lord,” he said. “I’m grateful.”

The Dark Lord snorted.

“Yes, well, so far I’ve treated you much better than you deserve. Let this be a reminder to you that I could flip that switch at any moment.”

“I won’t forget, my Lord.” Neville could barely meet his eyes without feeling the urge to knock him to the ground, too, and pummel his face until his teeth shattered.

“See to it that you don’t. Now go, and don’t disturb me until it’s time for dinner.”

Neville left the room and put as much distance between it and himself as he could. His whole body felt stiff and sore, but Neville thought that aside from some potentially bruised ribs, he was fine—except in sore need of sleep and stretching—and retribution.

Two of those things are achievable, at least, he thought.

A step caught his attention, and Neville looked up in time to see George come to a halt at the turn in the corridor, having just seen him.

Wherever he went when he was away from the manor, Neville didn’t care to know. He was in no mood to hear what life his former friend had most recently taken, or what operation he was currently conducting for the Dark Lord. It made him feel heavy and bleak to even think about.

“Busy?” George called as he approached. He was smiling a little, but any humor his face had once held had long since been gone.

Neville nodded in greeting.

“I’ve got a to-do list the length of this corridor,” he said drily. “I’m swamped.”

George let out a chuckle. He was dressed in all black, and his fair skin was red and peeling from sun exposure. He assessed the other former Gryffindor with a shrewd eye.

“You look like shit.”

It hurt to laugh, but he did it anyway.

“I was thinking the same about you.”

“Just like old times,” George said, but then his smile dropped. “He tortured you, didn’t he. Don’t lie, I went through it, too.”

Neville gave a stiff nod.

“Could’ve been worse,” he muttered. “Why’re you back?”

“I’m required to attend this big event,” George said gravely. “What a merry time it’ll be for us all. Say, where’s Pansy? I can’t find her anywhere.”

“Vacation,” Neville said. “Lord Malfoy granted her a few months’ leave. She left about a week and a half ago.”

George raised his brows, surprised. “Isn’t that nice of him.”

“He and Lady Hermione are going to do a vow ceremony that day, before the feast,” Neville said. “What more vows they need, I can’t fathom.”

“From what I understand, there were no vows when they were first married,” George said slowly. “I’ve been loosely told by Pansy that Lady Hermione wasn’t awake. I suppose the Dark Lord is giving her a proper ceremony this time around.”

“How romantic,” Neville said drily. George smirked but didn’t laugh.

“Well, be on your toes on the big day,” he said. “Something tells me a feast isn’t the only thing in store for us.”

“No, I don’t think so either,” Neville said. “I’m sure he’ll be expecting to learn whether Luna and I’ve accepted his offer.”

At that, George nodded, realization dawning over his face. He looked at Neville knowingly.

“Join him and be saved, or die.”

Neville nodded. George looked at him somberly.

“And have you decided?”

“We think we have.”

But Neville seemed unsure.

“Is it worth it?” he asked, staring into George’s cursed eye, never having seen it while the Dark Lord looked through it, wondering if Malfoy was watching him now. “You said yes. Do you ever regret it?”

George hesitated, looked behind Neville’s shoulder down the corridor toward the direction of the Dark Lord’s study.

“Let’s keep walking,” he muttered. “And I’ll tell you.”

“He isn’t watching right now, is he?” Neville asked warily, glancing at George from the corner of his eye.

George shook his head. “You can tell when. It’s pretty obvious.”

“Does he ever warn you when he’s going to do it?”

“No. Nor should he feel the need to, as I’m nothing but a servant.”

Neville felt a chill run down his spine. George’s voice was dark and flat.

“I haven’t been around so much since you came here,” George admitted. “The Dark Lord did that by design, I think. He’s a spider, keeping everyone on different threads, manipulating where they go as much as he can. He doesn’t like us all talking to each other too much. He kept me and Lady Hermione from interacting too much a lot after she found out I worked for him, and I’m sure that’s been the case here.”

That made perfect sense to Neville.

They were walking toward the least occupied wing of the manor. Neville wished they could have gone to get Luna, but seeing as she was busy with Lucio, he would have to make sure to relay everything to her later.

“Do you really enjoy working here, for him?” Neville asked.

“Does anyone enjoy chaining themselves to someone or some cause for the sake of money or survival?” George asked. “I said yes to Him to save myself, and to save Fred. I was desperate. After Fred killed himself, I had nothing left to live for. So when the Dark Lord collected me and demanded my eye and my oath, I didn’t fight it. But I can’t say that I’ve found a new meaning in life, or that I’m the happiest I’ve ever been. I think you can relate.”

Neville could. But he at least had Luna here with him. Who could George claim?

“He keeps his promises, if that’s what you’re afraid of,” George said. “He pays me well. My freedom may be limited, but not as much as you might think. He blessed me with power and gave me a job to do, and I do it well. He’ll do the same for you if you say yes.”

“Are you allowed to keep a family?” Neville asked. “Has he ever granted *you* time off?”

“He doesn’t care what I do on my own time, so long as I keep to my oath,” George explained patiently. “He’s never offered me extended time off but I don’t think I’d want it. I can’t bear having nothing to do.”

“But is it worth it?” Neville asked, his voice low but insistent.

George sighed.

“If you’re doubting your choice this much, I think you know the answer,” he said. “But no, it isn’t. I have no one else in my life. When I’ve got my days off and I’m not here I go to the Burrow. I go back to my old room, and I sit there and think of my family, who’re all gone. I don’t even dare think of starting my own. I’ve got all that damn gold in my vault and all this power and I’d trade it all in if it meant going back to the way things used to be. Before the war. Before that prick Malf—” he groaned a little in pain, staggering.

Neville looked at him in alarm but George had rectified his mistake, sighing again.

“Before *Lord* Malfoy chose his wife,” he finished. “So there’s the assurance you need, if you want it so desperately.”

Neville said nothing for a moment.

“Have you considered taking an early exit?” he asked. A horrible, horrible question to ask—but what wasn’t horrible about the entire situation? Plus, though he hadn’t spoken that much to George since coming here, he got the feeling it wasn’t unreasonable to ask, judging by the way he spoke.

George stopped, forcing Neville to halt. Sunlight poured through the open windows—a rare, sunny day despite the cold and snow outside.

“I’ve tried,” he admitted quietly. “And it doesn’t work. The Dark Lord keeps all of us from doing it to ourselves. Our lives belong to him, after all.”

“Even Lady Hermione?” Neville asked, aghast.

George looked at him, the harsh sunlight highlighting the scars on his face, the hollows around his eyes.

“Especially her. Meaning she’s tried before, and more than once, according to Pansy.”

Neville stood there, chilled to the bone.

No wonder she really had given in to Malfoy.

“So be on your guard,” George continued. “Because I wasn’t just talking about your big decision when it comes to the feast. I think a new way out is going to present itself, and I’m taking it.”

Neville frowned, thinking back to the odd hint Pansy had left him and Luna with.

“Well what is it?”

George shrugged. “Can’t say for sure. But think to yourself, and tell Luna this, too: whose hand would you rather die by?”

Nott’s tip had been more fruitful than Draco had expected. The article Nott had left with him was very intriguing, indeed. He’d left for Godric’s Hollow later that week, right after breakfast with Hermione and Lucio.

He’d known she would be going straight to Martin after he left, and it had rankled him. She’d seen the irritation in his eyes but gave him a sweet kiss before he left. Draco had grasped her to him briefly, growling in her ear.

“You are mine tonight.”

She nodded, a flush on her cheeks, her delicious body yielding to his. Draco had seen desire stir in her eyes and had to force himself to leave the manor, for as much as he wanted to stay and enjoy her appetite, he had to follow through on the tip and see whether it was worthwhile.

He might have taken George with him but decided against it. George and Hermione had grown a little friendlier of late—he had seen them speaking to one another on a few occasions. He’d analyzed them both during those occasions but saw nothing that hinted that she might want him, too. And George had confirmed to him that nothing was happening between them, leaving Draco silently relieved. It would be more fruitful to leave him at the manor and have him spy on Hermione and her lover’s activities.

What are you doing to me, firebird? He asked himself privately, disgruntled.

He had not seen or spoken to Martin since the day he had found them in the library. Was not entirely sure he could keep himself from ripping the painter apart with his teeth or crushing his femurs with just a gesture of his hand.

The satisfaction would be fleeting, but worthwhile? Perhaps not. His dear little firebird would be a storm of fury to contend with, *and* she would get to gloat that he had broken his promise. Draco would not suffer two losses in that fashion when he could just contain himself.

She had been an animal when he'd caught her, riding Martin like it was what she was made to do. Draco had been spellbound, watching her, and at the same time registered a *hurt* in a way that made no sense.

She wanted him. That lowly half-blood?

She had *deceived* him how many times now, always slipping off to the library while he was gone. She'd made him believe it was only Nott she wanted but no, Draco knew now he had only been a decoy.

Clever thing. She had played him like a fool, to not even realize what was happening in his own home. Pansy had to have known, even if Neville claimed ignorance to the possibility. No wonder it was all so vague—Hermione likely had ordered her never to let him know.

He grit his teeth and wished he had stayed home after all, so he could see what she was doing now. She had to be with the painter that very moment, was probably feeding from him with great pleasure.

He'd met the old man in his home, not bothering to send word ahead nor knock, merely Apparating outside the tiny house and walking straight in.

The old man had heard the commotion and met him on the first floor, his wrinkled face slack from fear and awe. Then he had thrown himself to the floor and bowed.

"My Lord," he said, trembling from excitement. "My Lord, I did not expect you. It is an honor, such an honor to receive you in my home."

Draco had demanded to know what information he could provide about enchanting portraits. It hadn't been much, but it was more to go off of than what his research had provided. Draco rewarded the still-trembling wizard with a bag of gold and left, intent to begin his experiments again the moment he returned to the manor.

Very few people knew the trick, the old man had told him. It was not common knowledge and rightfully so, for in the wrong hands there was no telling what harm one might do. It was among the ranks of many hundred such spells that were seldom mentioned anywhere and not allowed to be published in any format due to their controversial natures. The article Nott had found deep within the archives was an ancient one—an underground publication that shared all manner of dark spells and artifacts, their histories and purposes. It had not run for long, as it had been discovered by authorities some twelve years after its inception and promptly banned and shut down.

The manor was quiet upon his return. He strode for his study at once, barely managing to push back the impulse to go to the library and listen and creep in, or storm inside altogether and catch his wife in the arms of her lover again.

Had she told Martin that he knew? Draco smiled. He was more than happy to lie with her on the assurance they were a secret, but *he* hadn't noticed they had been caught. He must think himself so lucky, so bold for having caught the fancy of the most powerful woman around.

He'd have shit himself if he'd seen me standing there watching. He still would, if I went and found them now. Let him try and stand up to me if he thinks he's such a contender.

What would Hermione think then? Would she still want her pathetic little lover if he ran screaming for the hills? Martin couldn't hope to protect her, or even himself for that matter. He was insignificant—a mere mortal, with limited power and a paintbrush in his pocket.

Hermione was still so eager to lean into those human novelties—let her, Draco thought.

The adjoining room into his study opened as he went to it and he shut himself inside, shrugged off his heavy cloak and went to the plain landscape painting he had set low upon the wall.

His previous experiments had hardly worked. He expected now, armed with this new information, that *something* would happen. Even the smallest step forward would set him at ease, so he raised his hands to the portrait, focused his mind, and began.

A shiver of excitement ran through him. Whereas before, his foot had repeatedly met the canvas and stopped short due to the resistance, it now passed through it as though it were an open doorway.

It took some effort to get in the rest of the way—Draco stooped low to fit the accommodations of the painting's antique frame and crouching, crept the rest of the way into the painting. It was as natural a movement as any other, and he watched with sharp eyes as the space around him changed, the setting morphing from his study in one second to this grassy, wildflower-dotted field in the next.

His heart raced with excitement.

It worked.

It was warm here, a summer morning. The air blew gently and tickled his hair about his face, fluttering his undone collar. The sun was still climbing and the atmosphere was sweet with the natural aroma of the land. Draco took in a great breath, holding it in, feeling his tension release and the pride within him ring.

There was nothing but field and flora around him, nowhere else to go. Draco turned all around, surveying the lush environment, and saw the rectangular portal hovering in the sky, showing right into the little room he had just exited to enter here.

So strange. So wonderful. He would have to remember upon quitting this place, to place containment shields on the frame from the outside, so that whoever he placed inside there could not come back out once in.

He pictured Hermione there, furious and lovely, trapped in that eternal summer.

Then he pictured Martin there, bloodied and weak, on the brink of death.

As he climbed back out of the portrait, he couldn't help but smile, all too pleased with himself. He felt more comforted before, having this up his sleeve now.

As Draco had worked on the painting and succeeded with his experiments, the small black snake hiding in the shadow underneath a draped table watched him patiently. It was too small

and well-hidden to attract any notice, and once Draco had submerged himself inside the painting, it decided it had seen enough.

It glided carefully from shadow to shadow until it came to the door, and swiftly left the room, waiting to transform back into the lady of the manor until it reached the corridor.

Hermione straightened, rolling her neck, sighing. Her eyes were cool. She reached down to fix her skirt and set off for the bedroom, the image of her husband's arrogant smile imprinted into her mind.

Hermione and Luna were walking along the manor the following morning. Lucio was with Neville and his tutors, and Hermione had asked Luna if she wanted to stretch her legs for a bit.

Luna had thought they were just going to walk about in the corridors considering how cold it was outside, but Lady Hermione surprised her by summoning her cloak and fastening it about her shoulders. She looked at Luna, encouraging in her eyes.

"Come outside with me," she said.

Luna couldn't help the brief second of hesitation that spanned between the invitation and her following action. She had not meant it to be so obvious, and tried to play it off, but knew that Hermione had seen.

"Yes, my Lady," she said, because she could say nothing else. She summoned her own cloak, put it on, and they went outside.

It was snowing lightly, and at that point in time there was a good deal of it already accumulated on the ground. The path winding around the large garden, however, was charmed to repel the snow, so they walked without issue.

"How are you finding the manor?" Hermione asked.

"It's an honor to work here," Luna replied automatically. "It is a beautiful home."

Hermione looked away, knowing the true sentiment behind the response.

"You can speak honestly," she said, turning back to face her companion. "I mean no ill."

Luna nodded, slightly relieved... but the memory of Hermione all twisted and venomous, looking at Draco with such pure rage before she cut off his hand, was still too fresh.

It frightened her to think that was lying under the surface at any given moment.

"It isn't as horrid as I thought it would be, my Lady," Luna finally replied cautiously. She brushed some snowflakes from the hair her hood didn't cover. "I have a bed, food, and I'm not being tortured. I get to see you, and George. Neville is here, too. There's that."

Hermione came to a stop, turning to face Luna, who looked at her warily.

"Has Draco offered you a deal?" Hermione asked. "To either of you?"

Luna blinked, surprised.

“Yes,” she said. There was no reason to lie. She would find out soon enough when the Dark Lord made a spectacle of their punishment, and demanded to know their answer beforehand. “He’s offered us clemency if we choose to join him.”

Hermione nodded. It sounded just like something Draco would do. She had suspected such a thing for some weeks now.

“What do you think of it?” she asked.

“I think we’ll take it, my Lady,” Luna responded slowly. “It seems the best option.”

“Does it?” Hermione asked. Her gaze was somber. Heavy. Luna could sense that she felt her doubt in her answer. She gripped the folds of her cloak.

“The only other option is to let him kill us,” Luna said. “Forgive me for saying so, my Lady, but not all of us have Horcruxes to keep us standing in the wake of a killing curse.”

“You speak of it like it’s such a marvel. I wouldn’t wish a Horcrux on anyone else,” Hermione said. “Despite its advantages, I would much rather be human again. If I’d had a choice, I never would have accepted it.”

Luna didn’t believe her at first—who would regret such power? But the look on Hermione’s face was earnest.

Could she trust her? Luna didn’t know, and it wrenched at her heart. She was sweating under her layers despite the cold around them.

“Being part of this court doesn’t seem so awful, if we say yes,” Luna pointed out.

“If you think so, then accept him, and you’ll have no reason to fear and a lifetime to face regret if you have it,” Hermione replied. “You know that if you accept him, your life will still belong to him. And you know it will take a *lot* to earn his trust. You know what he demanded of George. Of *me*. Are you willing to pay that price?”

Luna didn’t respond.

“What if you could escape, instead?”

Luna gave her an odd, doubtful look. Suddenly, despite wanting to trust Hermione, she felt rather paranoid that Lord Malfoy was lingering somewhere she could not see, waiting for her first transgression.

“I know it isn’t possible,” she said, swallowing though her throat was dry, “and I’ll get into great trouble if Lord Malfoy learns I’ve discussed such a thing with you.”

Lady Hermione frowned.

“It’s alright,” she said, reaching for her with one hand. “I only want to help you.”

“And what will happen if word of this reaches Him?” Luna asked, taking a step back. “We’ll all be punished. I can’t entertain this sort of talk, my Lady. He may forgive *you*, as you are his wife, but Neville and I face greater consequences.”

Lady Hermione stared at her, her lips in a grim line.

“You don’t want my help, then.”

“We’ll fend for ourselves,” Luna said firmly. “I mean no disrespect, my Lady. And don’t think I’m not grateful for the offer. But there’s no way Lord Malfoy would allow Neville and I to escape under any circumstances. Whatever you plan to do, I wish you well—but something tells me you’ll have a greater chance of succeeding if you keep it to yourself, and don’t let anyone else in.”

“And you’re sure about this?”

“Neville and I had our time,” Luna insisted. ‘When we fled the country after Lord Malfoy first took power. We lived in peace for a few years before coming back here to fight again.’ She cleared her throat, as it had suddenly gone hoarse. “And it was wonderful while it lasted. I hope you can have that, too. And if it means looking away when help is offered to increase your chances, then I can make peace with that.”

Lady Hermione looked up at the sky.

“Maybe I don’t want another sacrifice in my name.”

“Maybe that isn’t for you to decide, my Lady.”

Lady Malfoy’s eyes flashed. Luna’s heart jumped in fear.

“I could order you to just to take my hand,” she said. “I could force you to leave with me, the both of you. Is that what it will take to save you? You’re telling me you’re willing to lay down and die for my sake? Again? I’ll tell you now: I don’t deserve it.”

“Maybe not, if you insist,” Luna replied, trying not to show how unsettled she felt by her former friend’s words. “But you know who does. And if you could use yourself as a distraction to make sure he’s safe, even if it damns you, you’d do it, wouldn’t you?”

Lady Malfoy sighed, her edges softening.

“I would,” she said.

“Then please, may I take my leave, my Lady?”

Lady Malfoy nodded, and Luna left the garden, dashing back inside the manor.

Somewhere far away, in a secret location heavily warded and protected, Pansy Parkinson sat by a window with a note in her hand, her mind racing and anxious.

The note bore the handwriting of Lady Malfoy. It was written on a plain piece of parchment rather than the luxurious cardstock upon which Lord Malfoy wrote his correspondence. Pansy knew it had been sent in secret and with haste, and she hoped that all was well in the manor.

All it had on it were two words.

Tomorrow evening.

She and Mr. and Mrs. Granger (who happily were no longer under the curse of the Obliviate Hermione had put upon them since before her disappearance and now lived with

their memories largely restored, yet full of gaps) had been in the drawing room taking tea when the note had arrived. Pansy had excused herself to receive it and read it in private.

She would have to tell them what they ought to expect for then. Their grandson would be joining them possibly, and on an even slimmer chance, so would their long-lost daughter.

They finally remembered her. They remembered their immense pain at never knowing what happened to their daughter, the mysterious wealth in their accounts, their lives under different identities. They'd recognized Pansy from her last visit with Hermione, or Jean, as she'd called herself, and when Pansy had told them their true identities and how they knew each other, they had sobbed with relief and horror, and pressed her with question after question about their daughter and where she was, if they could see her.

Pansy was terrified of raising their hopes up too high, ever wary of disaster. But they deserved to know—it had been so long. And they had assured her, after she had brought them here and explained almost everything, that they could deal with the heartache, they simply needed to *know*.

It was awkward still, and painful—but they did have that right, and she had promised Hermione she would take care of them. Pansy braced herself, clutching the note in one hand, and went back to the drawing room, ready to show it to them.

[that same night, back at the manor]

Draco's arm was wrapped tight around her, molding her to him. They were both nude, and their bare skin pressed against each other.

Hermione stared at the stained-glass window as Draco pressed soft kisses to her shoulder.

"How are you feeling, firebird?" he asked.

Hermione pondered for a moment.

"I'm excited for tomorrow," she said, taking the hand that was on her tummy and squeezing it. "It'll be so grand, Draco."

He replied with some inane comment, but she was barely listening.

In her mind she was playing out as many different scenarios of how the event might go, so that she could be prepared. She pictured Draco in pieces, cut up by her own hand, of him bleeding profusely, his organs spilling out onto the floor, of him screaming in pain and rage—each one had her wetter and wetter.

Tomorrow would fly by. Lucio's lessons were in the morning and so they had not been cancelled, and Martin would be in the library as usual. Neville and Luna would be busy all day, ensuring every last detail was in order for the ceremony and the feast. And from there—well. Who knew how the day would end? She was bracing herself for either outcome.

No doubt the high moods of the day would have Draco excited. He might sweep her into an unused room for a quick, passionate fuck, but what she wanted *now* was to savor him, for this might be her last chance to do so before everything changed.

Let me savor you before I swallow you whole, husband.

She twisted in a burst of strength and speed, lifting his arm so she could sit atop his stomach.

The movement had been so quick and out of nowhere she had startled Draco—he looked up at her in surprise, grinning.

Hermione leaned down and kissed him, hunger fueling her movements.

“Darling bird, are you ready to marry me again?” he asked breathlessly when their lips finally parted. His arms slid down her form to cup her ass.

“I suppose I am,” Hermione said with a sly smile. “I’ve rather grown used to you as my husband.”

“Mm. Have you?” he asked, sounding pleased, biting his lip as Hermione, situated over his lower abdomen, ground against him. His cock was already erect and leaning heavily against his abdomen. She nudged it with her ass and it twitched hungrily.

“Well, not everyone gets someone so willing to do anything for them,” she said, still grinding. “I never had any doubt of your devotion, Draco. Yet you’ve shown me over and over just how far you’re willing to go.”

“Farther,” he said, his voice guttural and rough. His hands dug deep into the meat of her ass, pulling her down to slide her wetness along the length of his cock, making her appreciate every vein and ridge. Hermione moaned, her head dropping down.

“I’ll always go farther, my love,” he said. “Because you’re worth it.”

He shifted his hips, wanting to penetrate her—Hermione reached down and blocked him with her hand.

“You are, too,” she said. “You’re worth the trouble, Draco. I’m sorry I didn’t see it before.”

She took hold of him, teasing his tip with her thumb—Draco panted sharply and thrust into her hand.

“Save your vows for tomorrow, firebird,” he said. “All I want to hear from you now is your lovely moaning.”

Hermione pointedly tapped on his collar.

“I believe it isn’t *you* who should be making orders now, is it?”

“Use me as you please, then, my Lady,” he said, the look in his eyes threatening to scorch her. “All I want is to pleasure you.”

Hermione gave him a dazzling smile.

“I love to hear you say that,” she said, giving him a slow tug. Draco bit his lip, groaning. She rubbed him along her lips, let him feel her wetness. “But I want your tongue for something other than speaking.”

Draco understood at once, his eyes gleaming in hunger, and Hermione let him go, let him slide down on the mattress so he was fully on his back, and she could straddle his head with

her thighs and lower herself until his tongue could taste her.

[THE MORNING OF THE CEREMONY]

There was not much free time that day for Neville and Luna to take a break. The heavy atmosphere inside the manor that day seemed heavier than normal, like the manor itself was holding its breath for whatever horror was approaching. None of the decorations, not the beautiful flowers nor the decorated tables could distract from that tension, and with the passing of each hour it seemed to loom larger.

The only one appearing not to feel it was the Dark Lord himself—he seemed to *thrive* on it, in fact. Pleased with the arrangements, he granted Neville and Luna a short break, giving them a look laden with meaning, as if to say, *this is your last chance to think my offer over*.

Knowing there would be no other opportunity for privacy together for the rest of the day they rushed outside, braving the cold, and plunged past the treeline.

There was no time for anything else than to hold each other, to press their lips together in a desperate bid for comfort.

“I love you,” Luna murmured, touching her forehead to his. “All the guilt I carry—you were never part of it.”

Neville sighed, holding her around the waist. Her long hair tangled around his hands and he rubbed it between his fingers, memorizing the texture, the weight of it. He looked into her eyes, recalling the discussion they’d had in which he shared what George had told him, and she divulged what Lady Hermione had told her. The mutual decision afterward, and the fading of their doubts in the dead of night.

“I love you too,” he said. “No matter what happens tonight—I’m glad we had time together. Every single second of it. Regardless of everything else that happened—I’m glad we have each other.”

She smiled, tears sliding down her face, and nodded.

Everything went as it should and without trouble. The tutors came and little Lucio, also affected by the heavy air in the manor, went along with them and Luna to the nursery without complaint, but cast one last look behind his shoulder toward his parents before the door shut behind him.

Draco took his wife’s hand and kissed it, then excused himself to his study. They had agreed to not see each other until the ceremony. He suspected she would use this time to visit her lover, and though it annoyed him, he bit his tongue and reassured himself with the memory of their passionate lovemaking the night before. By tonight’s end, he would see to it that a new marriage certificate was drawn up for them, one that she would willingly sign with her true name—Hermione Malfoy.

Hermione headed into the library and found Martin there, pulled him into the recesses of the great room. The excitement of her impending plan had sharpened her hunger and so she ravaged him thoroughly and he submitted fully and gladly.

“Come tonight,” she said, when they had finished and she was standing, rearranging her hair. He was still slumped on the couch before the fire, recovering. “Has Draco already invited you?”

“Yes,” Martin said. “My Lord made it clear I must be in attendance. I’ll be there.”

That pleased and worried her, that he would be there to witness Neville and Luna’s fate, however it went.

“You won’t stay for the whole night,” she decided, going to him and taking his face in her hands. “It’s too dangerous. I’ll tell you when it’s time for you to leave.”

He looked *quite* relieved at that, and nodded.

“You said something about an escape before,” he said, lowering his voice. “Is that tonight?”

Hermione didn’t respond—didn’t even nod.

“Where do you live?” she asked. “Give me your address.”

He did so, more confused than ever. Hermione seemed to concentrate very hard for a minute or so, committing his address to memory until she was satisfied.

“I’ll tell you when to leave,” she said firmly. “And when I do, no matter what happens, you *go home*. Don’t look back, and go. Pack whatever you can’t live without. Bring your father. And I’ll come to get you.”

She looked so serious it made his stomach turn. What exactly was she planning? Martin eyed her warily.

“Can’t I help you somehow?”

“You’ll only be putting yourself at risk of Draco’s wrath,” she said, frowning. “I can’t let that happen to you. Tell me you’ll do as I say, Martin.”

Martin nodded hastily.

“I will. I will. I promise.”

That seemed to calm her a little, for the strange, almost manic gleam in her eye subsided slowly.

“Good,” she said, her voice soft like falling snow. “Then I’ll see you tonight.”

If Pansy were here, she would have helped to dress up her hair. That task was now Luna’s. Hermione sat at her vanity in the master bedroom as Luna carefully arranged her hair.

“Is this alright, my Lady?” she asked.

Hermione looked at herself and nodded.

"It's lovely," she said. "Thank you."

Rather than the loose, flowing hair that Draco tended to prefer, she had opted to have it all done up into a voluminous bun on the top her head, with loose tendrils around her face. The only ornamentation was the same golden circlet Draco had bestowed on her. She wore the matching arm pieces too, as allowed by her sleeveless gown.

She had chosen black for the occasion—it was only suitable, considering the day would end in mourning regardless of whether she was free or not. She also didn't want to escape from here and land in Pansy's safe house with visible blood stains on her clothes, frightening them all.

Her wand was in a deep pocket of her skirt—the only item she wanted to take with her. All her clothes, all the baubles and jewels and such that Draco had given her throughout the years could stay behind, as she didn't want them, and had already taken out the best of them to help fund her future endeavors—or only Lucio and Pansy's.

All those things he'd given her, all the furniture and these new paintings and the books, she would gladly see them all rot, and him along with them.

Hermione stood from the vanity and rearranged the sheer black silk gossamer cape that was attached to her shoulders. It was black and shimmering slightly, embroidered with gold along the bottom.

Draco and Neville would be waiting downstairs in the dining room, which had been cleared of its chair and tables to make room for a lavish, beautiful scene resplendent with fragrant flowers and columns and arches.

There they would join hands to recite their vows, and she would accept his ring again.

He had said he would take off all the horrible enchantments he had put on it. Did she believe him? Strangely, yes—but she wouldn't be so foolish as to allow him to put it on her finger again without making sure he kept his word, first—vow or not.

"My Lady," Luna said gently, a tentative warning in her voice. "The time."

"Well," Hermione said with a barely repressed sigh. "Let's go downstairs."

When Hermione entered the dining room with Luna following, trailing behind her long veil, she almost froze in place, seeing how the room had been transformed for the occasion. Draco was already waiting there, standing still as stone, his gaze bright and devouring her at once. Neville was there a few steps behind him, his head lowered.

Draco saw her and found himself at a loss for words. She had not wanted music to be played during the ceremony and he had conceded to that a little grumpily but now figured it was for the best, for he wouldn't have paid attention to a single note whatsoever. Should the world come crumbling down around them at that very moment, he still would not be able to take his eyes off her. It seemed fitting enough that all he could hear was his own heart beating rapidly in his chest.

Would there ever be a time when she didn't take his breath away?

The lighting in the room seemed to grace her every movement and feature—she strode forward toward him, a striking figure cutting through the stillness of the room.

The image of her so many years ago, when she had first landed into the manor with blood in her hair and her red gown all torn up and wet from snow, flashed across his mind. She had been unconscious and wretchedly unaware of what was happening as he'd taken the ring that was now in his pocket, and slid it onto her finger, uniting them both through the darkest of magic. She had deserved so much better—a proper wedding, a proper gown and event to help her realize the importance of their union.

Perhaps that was why she had struggled to learn her place all these years—it was his own fault—if he had been this clear from the start, and arranged a proper wedding then she might have understood so much sooner.

This scene now could not be any more different from then.

She was completely shrouded in black—a heavy veil hung from her head to her toes and trailed behind her, and the lace that adorned it obscured her face from anyone's view—she might have been laughing silently underneath that layer, for all he knew, but her shoulders were still, and her head was high. Adorning her head was the golden circlet, still gleaming despite the cover of the veil.

It filled him with so much pride to see.

There is my Lady, he thought, entranced. *My queen.*

Longbottom and Lovegood had done quite well in decorating the room to suit the ceremony—a black sky took up the ceiling, and brilliant stars sparkled across it, and the flowers and décor that lined the path to the altar was beautiful as if taken out of a dream. Their heavy, heavenly fragrance suffused the room, and adding in the orange glow from the many candles hovering in the air around it all, he felt quite in the midst of a dream—a most splendid one.

Hermione walked forward alone now down the aisle—Lovegood had left her position behind the Dark Lady to stand beside Neville demurely, the both of them blending into the shadows.

Draco's heart seemed to pump harder with each step she took—had she practiced? Or was it merely the effect of her dress? For she nearly *glided* toward him, an apparition draped in black rather than white.

But finally, she reached him—stood before him, her head bowed.

Draco reached over at once, gently lifting the heavy veil, folding it over her head to fall down her back.

Her gown was black, too—a sumptuous concoction of silk that hugged her figure. The neckline of the bodice was adorned with delicate flowers that spanned across her chest to her shoulders in delicate straps, little wisps of gossamer fabric that fluttered against her skin like butterfly wings.

"My Lady," Draco murmured in a whisper, taking her in slowly.

Hermione watched him, a faint flush on her face, her lips pink and parting to speak.

“My Lord.” She made to bow—Draco stopped her, pulled her up.

“You look exquisite,” he said heavily. “A true Dark Lady.”

Around her throat was his emerald choker—it gleamed and winked at him. Underneath it, her skin bore faint red impressions in the shape of the jewels where it had dug slightly into her skin. He could see that old scar of his bite on her shoulder.

Mine, mine, mine.

She held no bouquet but her hands were still cupped together, clutching a pomegranate. Draco saw it and grinned.

“Wonderful,” he said. “Wonderful.”

And he helped her forward to stand opposite him.

There was no minister there to conduct the ceremony. There didn’t need to be. The very magic in the air surrounding them would be witness to their vows, and Longbottom and Lovegood too, would serve that purpose.

Her own eyes were on him, too, taking in his appearance. He could see she was entranced by him, too, and it brought a rush to his head. The stars above reflected in her eyes below. Though Draco had groomed and dressed himself with care for the ceremony, he did so with the aim of complementing her, not overshadowing her. And he had succeeded. They matched perfectly, both in black and traces of gold, power apparent in their very beings.

“You look beautiful, Draco,” Hermione said, and he might have preened, but was still so completely taken by her appearance that he waved her words off.

“Not half so much as you, firebird,” he said earnestly. “Although I pictured you in white—this is better.”

“I thought so too,” Hermione said, and squeezed his hand. “Shall we begin?”

“May I go first?” he asked tenderly, and she nodded.

A sudden wave of floating candles appeared in the air around them, and the light dimmed.

“Nothing about our story has been traditional,” he said, his eyes shining. “From the day I met you, Hermione, I knew you were different—I thought I hated you, but I could never get you off my mind. You are extraordinary in every sense. Kind, intelligent, cunning and brave and resilient. It took me a few years later to realize that I wanted you to be mine more than I had ever wanted anything in life. You stood up to me no matter how afraid you were, and time after time you’ve bested me, even when all the odds were stacked against you.”

The light lent to his form from the candles around them framed him in a way that was nearly mystical; it reflected brilliantly in his pale eyes and hair. A strange power hummed in the air softly.

“You’ve brought out the best and the worst of me. You know the awful creature I am, Hermione—I’ve shown you every part of me. I’ve bared my soul to you, however much of it remains.”

He knelt at her feet now, sinking gracefully to the floor, and took her hands in his, clutching the pomegranate she held.

“You are the best thing in my life,” he murmured, looking up at her. “You are what I live and breathe for, and I’m ready to step into forever with you, and change the world together.”

He kissed her hands reverently, then released one so that he could take something from his pocket.

Hermione watched as he pulled out the diamond and emerald ring again, pulling it from its original green box. She recognized it at once and held her breath.

Her first instinct was to pull her hand away. Beautiful though it might be, held nothing in terms of significance to her but pain. Draco had told her the story of how he had found it by pure chance in the Room of Requirement, how he had saved it on a whim and then realized it was perfect for her. Hermione had never found the story as amusing as he did. For *years*, she had wanted so desperately to take it off and never feel its malevolent, oppressive presence again. Twice, he had forced it onto her when she had been unable to consent, and that had given him the power and freedom to stake his claim.

That ring had controlled her life; prohibited her from touching any man to ease Draco’s jealousy, and punished her if she ever did anyway; it had tracked her so that every time she managed to escape the manor he always knew where to find her. It had refused to let itself be removed from her finger, and many a morning had dawned where she’d woken with a bloody, scratched up hand—the result of her unconsciously trying to claw it off in her sleep.

“I will honor your power and your will,” he said. “I will surrender to your love and might in any way you choose to wield it. I will comfort you when old ghosts arise. I will shelter you when you are lost, and tend to you through any sickness if it grips you. I will love and revere you as I have every dawn and every evening that befalls us, and should the end of time come to pass, and we finally wither into ash, I’ll accept my death knowing that I never wasted my love for you.”

That strange force in the air was growing steadily. There was a strange flare in the flames of the candles nearest them, as if her and Draco’s magic was affecting them somehow. Hermione only noticed it from her peripheral view—she couldn’t look away from Draco.

His eyes bored into hers. They would always haunt her no matter what she did... but she felt no fear now. She searched him hard and then looked at the ring, reaching out to it with her magic, trying to feel if he had lied, and the ring remained enchanted.

He held it up to her, knowing her suspicion.

“Be my forever, Hermione,” he said, his voice smooth and low. “Grant me the honor of your love and your presence for as long as we both remain. Give me the privilege of being the one you rule beside. Be my Queen and my wife, and let our hearts beat as one forevermore.”

There was nothing coming from the ring. Hermione probed it again, came to the same result.

So he had kept his promise. Her knees buckled slightly from the realization.

He was still holding the ring out, and she knew she must take it, but didn’t. Not yet.

She swallowed quietly, cleared her throat.

"Let me make my vows before I take the ring," she said. He nodded, still grasping her hand.

Hermione reached down and touched his collar, focusing on the transfiguration spell in her mind.

She had no ring to give him. Nor did he need one, for since the first day she had been trapped in the first manor, he had never once taken off his own wedding ring.

It pleased her that he still wore the collar, and that he had made no attempts to take it off. It was cold under her touch, and solid. She tapped it once, watched its width halve itself, and the dull luster of the iron transformed into a highly polished silver-white band of platinum around his throat, fitting more closely than before, but not enough to chafe against his skin.

Draco looked down at it. She cupped his cheek and he kissed her palm. Hermione tilted his head back so he would look at her.

"You *are* a monster," she began. "And you have been from the start. I hated and feared you for your cunning, and your strength, your willingness to do whatever it takes to get what you want. But in a sense, I have to admire it, too. There is no one else, past or present, who deserves the title of Dark Lord more. It suits you best in the way I can't imagine you with different-color eyes or hair."

She had rarely, if ever given him such praise. Draco flushed a little with pleasure, his lips parting.

"You never attempted to hide from me what you really are," she continued. "And I thank you for that, because I would rather face the brutal truth than be misled for years and then find out someone's true nature and be blindsided. You spared me that specific pain, though it was lost in the midst of the others you heaped on me. You've drowned me in your love daily from the day you gave me that ring, and I've grown so used to being without air that I don't know that I need it anymore."

Draco kissed her palm again.

"You are brutal. You are ruthless and demanding and covetous and prideful. I abhorred you for all those reasons and more. You made me face the darkness for so long I began to see my own reflection there. Your own pride will let you believe that it was you who turned me into what I am now. That may be partly true—you created my Horcrux. You pushed me to the brink over and over no matter how much I fought back."

Her affectionate hold on his cheek twisted so that she gripped his jaw now.

"But *I* built myself into this," she said in a soft, seductive snarl. "Yes, you prevented me from harming myself but eventually *I* made the decision to survive, to fight. I took the hand of the darkness inside me and grew into my power for *my* sake, and for Lucio's, not to appease your wishes. You may have kept me alive against my will, but I reforged my spirit on my own."

"And what will you do with it?" Draco asked softly. There was desire in his gaze. The lights continued to flicker around them.

“I will rule with you,” she said. Her voice reverberated around the room. “I will protect what is ours and I will honor you, my Lord, but I will temper your power with mine if need be, for I will not be your silent, submissive partner.”

“Nor would I have you be,” Draco said. “You know how I crave your fire.”

Hermione smiled. She heard Luna gasp.

“I will give you my forever, if you surrender me your freedom. Give me the privilege of ruling you, Draco, and I’ll be your ruler and your wife for as long as we live.”

“Granted,” Draco said throatily. She let him slide the ring onto her finger, and there was a pulse in the air around them, and he let her lead him up by the platinum collar, let her break that pomegranate clean in two with her bare hands, let her hold it to his mouth and squeeze so that he might drink. She could feel the fruit crumple in her hand, and the juice flowed like blood out of a heart’s valves to stain her skin and splash over him.

“Granted,” Hermione echoed. The dark red juice of the fruit dripped onto his face—he lapped at it, licking his lips, took hold of her wrist and put the fruit to his mouth and bit into it, his sharp teeth destroying the soft translucent flesh, and he began sucking the juice out.

“We belong to each other,” she said, her voice hollow. “For all eternity.”

And then she pulled the fruit from his mouth and kissed him, devouring him whole.

END PART ONE

33. The Reckoning (The End pt 2)

Guests began arriving soon after the ceremony was over. Neville and Luna, their identities once again disguised by Draco's spells, congratulated them quietly, then went off to receive the guests and lead them into the banquet hall.

Hermione had no desire to attend to Draco's followers just yet. She magicked her veil from her head and felt its weight disappear at once.

A fire burned in her veins, possibly the result of the strange and ancient magic that had settled around them during the ceremony to seal their vows. She needed him, and it was all that mattered in that moment.

Draco, too, seemed to feel the same urgency—he hissed softly and was shrugging off his cloak impatiently, their eyes locking together. Hermione had pulled off her knickers from underneath her skirt and was on him, pushing him down to the floor in the middle of the pathway that had been constructed to walk between the masses of flowers on either side of them. Neville and Luna left the room without a word, stationing themselves by the door in disturbed silence.

The candles still hovered in the air above them, and remnant traces of the magic that had constructed their vows seemed to tickle the atmosphere still. Hermione mounted Draco, ripped open his blouse to reveal that pale expanse of solid muscle. He moaned as she touched him everywhere, arched upward and into her touch, begging for more, his hands clumsily working at undoing his trousers.

"Mine," Hermione rasped, licking at his nipple. Ferocious, amplified need gnawed at her—she was so wet, practically dripping already, desperate to be *filled*, to *claim*. She heard the zip of Draco's trousers and felt him push fabric aside and then he was there, huge and hot, throbbing against her.

"Yours," Draco panted. His collar gleamed in the light. Hermione bent low over him and licked it slowly, following its curve around his throat.

Draco shuddered underneath her. He could smell her desire, and nearly salivated with the want to lick it all off her.

"My will is yours," he said, groaning as she reached behind herself and took him in her hand, pressed his tip against her cunt, began lowering herself onto him.

"Then take me," she said, breathless already as she continued to impale herself on him, as he stretched her open. "Devour me."

Draco took her arms, flipped them over so that she was underneath him now, a powerful goddess undulating and moaning, pressing against him, her hands digging into his back, tearing at his skin.

He thrust into her hard and she keened softly in pleasure, her head falling back, exposing her throat. Draco filled that space, kissed her soft skin, marked her up with his teeth, his

hands clutching her tight as his hips jerked into her, fucking her with the desperate desire that tethered them together, rendering her breathless.

Above, the candles flared bright, and the power continued to mount in the air like a charge of energy until the Lord and Lady reached their climaxes simultaneously, there was a final pulse in the air so strong that it swept like a gust of wind through the room, guttering each flame and star so that darkness settled over all.

The doors to the banquet hall opened swiftly despite their great weight, revealing the splendid scene within. Countless round tables had been placed throughout, where handfuls of Draco's followers sat at each one. The tables were draped in luxurious black tablecloths and topped with ornate candelabras in the center, and fine cloth napkins had been placed before each seat.

Their guests had all arrived and so the place was abuzz with excited chatter and music that swelled softly above the voices—but it all came to an abrupt stop as she, Draco, and Lucio were revealed at the doorway.

There were so many more people than last time—Hermione kept her face carefully composed, restraining her shock, for her determination grappled it and pushed it down at once. There were many older members there that she recognized from occasions past, but the majority of them were so young that she assumed they might have just graduated from Hogwarts, were it still intact.

Had they all truly put their faith in Draco? She doubted any one of them was here against their will, judging from their expressions.

She knew what she had to do. There could be no backing down at this point. Her hands were already stained red. The only way out was to keep moving forward and not look back.

There was a collective rustle of fabric and scraping of chairs against the floor around the large banquet room as everyone stood to greet their Lord and Lady.

Lucio held her hand tightly. Hermione rubbed the pad of her thumb over the back of his hand, trying to reassure him. But he was always brave, and she had no doubt he would comport himself well.

Draco raised his arm, holding it in the space between himself and Hermione with his elbow bent and his palm parallel to the floor.

Hermione didn't hesitate. She raised her hand and placed it atop his, let him lead her and Lucio deep into the heart of the room and up the dais, to her own throne, placed beside his on the right side. Lucio sat first in his own little throne that sat beside his mothers' on her right. Then Hermione and Draco sat down in their own at the same time.

Everyone was bowing to them. Hermione looked out at the sea of people below, her nerves still settling.

"Be seated," Draco ordered, and their audience obeyed. "And let the feast begin."

The music resumed. Food instantly began to appear at each seat, and the pitchers of wine began to fill. The room was instantly suffused with the heady scent of roasted chicken and rosemary, and fish, and many other rich meals. Likewise, a heavy rectangular table appeared in front of the Malfoys so they could eat, and though the food smelled and looked delicious as always, Hermione had no appetite. Her own goblet filled with water and not wine. Hermione took a drink and surveyed the room.

She had thought Draco would want to make a speech at the start of the feast but he gave no inclination of wanting to do so yet. Hermione saw Nott seated at one of the tables nearest them, speaking to the man beside him. He noticed Hermione staring at him and smiled, inclining his head before she looked away.

“Aren’t you hungry, my love?” Draco asked. He held his own goblet to his lips but his eyes were on her. He took a drink of wine, swallowed, and licked his lips—they were still a bit red from the pomegranate he’d devoured earlier. Hermione reached over with one hand and wiped at the corner of his mouth.

She shook her head faintly and touched her stomach discreetly behind the cover of the table.

“I think I’m too excited to eat,” she said.

“I am, too,” he confided quietly with a soft smile.

To her right, Lucio was already tucking in heartily. Draco had apprised him long ago that at these functions he must keep quiet and not speak unless spoken to. Though this left a bad taste in her mouth, Hermione had not argued with the rule, as she didn’t like the thought of Lucio speaking to any of Draco’s supporters on his own, anyhow. There were no children present so there was little chance of socialization for him that night, which Hermione also preferred. He needed to go to bed at his usual time, as was protocol when he was in attendance to one of Draco’s events to avoid the debauchery that arose as the night wore on.

He looked up as she was watching him, his mouth full of food, and his little hand reaching for his drink, and saw her smiling. He swallowed and looked at her, confused.

“What is it, mummy?”

“Nothing,” Hermione replied, tucking some hair behind his ear. “You look so grown up tonight, that’s all.”

He seemed pleased by the idea and sat up a little straighter in his chair, puffing out his chest, and resumed eating.

Hermione laughed a little and accidentally caught Luna’s eye—she was also smiling, but it seemed a little strained and she looked rather pale.

Hermione wished she could take her hand and assure her everything would be fine. But there was no use in lying. She wanted to look over to Neville too, to see how he was faring, but he was out of view beside Draco, and she daren’t make it obvious.

Halfway through the feast, Hermione looked at the time and saw it was time for Lucio to go to bed. She signaled to Luna.

"Come on, darling," she said, turning to her son. "It's time for you to go to bed."

He had finished eating quickly and had spent some time watching the crowd below, his blue eyes thoughtful and a little intimidated. He turned to her gratefully, bored of the evening. If this was how grown-ups spent their time, he thought, then he didn't really care for it. There were no toys to play with, and everyone was wearing such fancy clothes—you couldn't run a race in them, or even fly on a broom.

He missed Pansy a lot. She would have let him run around and play in the nursery before bed, but Luna wouldn't. Though she was very nice and he did like her, she was still new to the manor and seemed anxious to not get into trouble, so she enforced the rules steadily. Pansy always minded the rules too, but he supposed she'd been around long enough and knew the bounds to which certain rules and orders could be bent, and acted confidently on that knowledge.

Lucio stood and let his mother take his hand. They went to father and bowed in sync.

"Is it that time already?" father asked, looking surprised.

"Indeed, my Lord," mother replied. "Let me take him up to bed."

Father frowned.

"Luna can take him up on her own, my love," he said to her. "You don't need to trouble yourself. This is what we have servants for."

Although Lucio wouldn't have minded being escorted upstairs by Luna, he'd been cheered by the prospect of mother coming along. Then he might sway her to tell Luna it was alright for him to play before bed.

Lucio was too busy watching his father warily to notice the red that flashed across his mother's eyes.

"I'm going to tuck him in, my Lord," she said. "And then I will come back and sit with you. Now say goodnight to your son."

Lucio expected his father to argue, to reply with sharp words, as he had often heard him do, and braced himself. To his surprise, however, father only smiled and relented.

"As my Lady commands," he said, and looked down to him. "Come here then, my son."

Lucio went to him dutifully and father put his hands on his shoulders and gave him a kiss on his forehead.

"Goodnight," he said. "Someday soon you'll be able to stay at these events for the entire night. You're getting to be a big boy now, look at you—I bet you'll be as tall as me."

Lucio smiled. "What if I'm taller?"

Father smiled. "Then your poor mother will be surrounded by giants, I daresay. But I think we'd be more afraid of her than she of us."

"I've bested a giant before," mother pointed out with a wry smile.

Father chuckled, his eyes sparkling. "And you'll do it again, no doubt, my love. You could learn a thing or two from her courage, Lucio. Your mother is a force of nature."

"Indeed," mother said. "Now bid your father goodnight."

Lucio kissed his father on the cheek, buoyed by the conversation.

"Goodnight, father."

"Off you go," father replied. "And I'll see you in the morning. Your mother and I will have special news to share."

"What news?" Lucio asked.

"It's a secret," she said smoothly, leading him away from father. "And we can't talk about it now."

While Lucio's mind conjured up a thousand possibilities of what this secret might be, he let Luna and his mother escort him from their table and down to the ground floor. Everyone was staring now and he held his mother's hand a little too tight. People were rising from their seats and bowing again. Some people called out to them as they passed.

"Make way for our Lady!"

"Good evening, little prince!"

Lucio almost waved but remembered his father's lessons in time, and nodded to the strangers instead. He didn't know exactly *why* it was so improper to wave but he could feel his father's eye on him from behind and didn't dare mess up—not when there was talk of this secret to be shared come morning. Perhaps they'd decided they would finally take him to get a wand! Or maybe they'd decided to visit Pansy, wherever she was now. Mother had shown him her letter and told him he mustn't tell father anything about it, that she would explain later. Lucio had complied, feeling that so far he was owed explanations on a great many things.

They went upstairs to the nursery. Mummy didn't say much, but he was too busy thinking about the secret that he didn't mind.

He entered the room and quickly began shedding his fine clothes, rushing to get into his pajamas.

"Wait here," mother was saying to Luna, who nodded and remained in the corridor as the door closed.

He'd missed a button on the clasp of his robe and couldn't get his head through. Lucio wrestled with the fabric, annoyed, and heard his mother approach quickly.

She helped him untangle himself from the cloak, but when he tried again to take it off, she stopped him.

"Darling, darling—remember the letter?" she asked. There was something urgent in her voice that made him stop.

He nodded. Fear crept into his heart and he wasn't sure why. What was there to be afraid of? But his mother's eyes and tone held the key.

"You told me not to tell father about it," he said.

"It was a secret," she said. "A very big one, and I have to tell you now. Listen very closely, my love. We don't have much time."

Lucio went still, watching her with grave eyes. Something did not feel right.

"I told you before that I would get you out of here," she whispered, holding him tightly by the shoulders. "It has to be now."

"Now?"

"Pansy is waiting for you," mother said. "Someplace safe. She and I made a plan before she left, so that we could leave. She sent this for you."

She produced something out of the air—something in an envelope—and took it.

Lucio had begun to shake.

"I'm leaving?" he asked. "Where am I going?"

Mother nodded.

"Only Pansy knows," mother said. "It has to be a mystery so we can't be followed. You *have* to go first. Your father will think you're sleeping, so he won't expect to see you again until tomorrow."

"But what about you?" Lucio asked, frowning. "Why can't you come with me?"

"I'll join you as soon as I can," mother said quickly, and her eyes were wet. "I need you to be brave, and to trust me, Lucio. I can't leave yet—there's something important I have to do first. I promise Pansy is waiting for you. All you have to do is take this and you'll be safe with her and your grandparents. They will take care of you until I get there."

Mummy looked afraid. There was something about this that Lucio didn't quite believe. His *grandparents* were with Pansy? So he was finally going to meet them?

"I want to go together," he said, his voice breaking a little. "I don't want you to be alone, mummy."

A few tears slid down her face. She held him to her, crushing him with her arms, but Lucio clung to her, as well, shaken.

"If we go together then I can't make sure that your father won't follow us," she said. "I have to stay just long enough to do that. Otherwise he *will* hunt us down, Lucio, and bring us back here."

His heart was pounding. Mother's hair smelled of lavender and it was soft under his cheek. Lucio shook his head.

"He'll make you stay," he said. "I know it. He'll make you stay and I'll never see you again. Let me stay, mother. I want to protect you."

"That's why *you* have to go first," mother said, her voice stronger now. "You deserve to live a wonderful life away from here. *You're* the reason I'm doing this, Lucio. You are the most important thing in the world to me, and I can't let him corrupt you, too."

Lucio sniffled loudly into her hair.

"But—"

"I will do everything in my power to join you," she said. "I swear it. And I want you to know no matter what happens, that I love you with all my heart, and I am so very proud of you. I couldn't have asked for a better son, and I know you have a good heart. You might miss this place and you might miss your father once you leave, but I promise there are better things beyond here. I need you to trust me, and to take this Portkey."

She let him go. Lucio wiped at his eyes. There was a heavy bag in her hands suddenly and she gave it to him.

"I packed some of your favorite things," she said, tucking some of his curls behind his ears. "I know you're scared, dearest, but we have to be quick—your father will get suspicious if we take too long."

"What if he keeps you here and finds me and Pansy, and brings us back?" Lucio asked.

"He won't," mother said sternly. "I won't let him."

He wanted to believe her, but everything he'd learned about his father (so far) indicated that it was a very real possibility. His hands were damp. He clutched the bag in one hand and her arm with the other. She held the envelope to him, unfolding it carefully to reveal a photograph within.

She touched it with one finger, and it began to glow blue. Suddenly moving on its own, the photograph slid out of the envelope and levitated into the air before him. A beautiful, animated sunset rolled in a loop as Lucio stared.

"You remember what Portkeys are," she said, and he nodded. "Grab on to it and *don't let go* until you land. It will feel strange and a little scary but I know you're brave, I know you can do it on your own. Can you do that for me?"

Lucio nodded. She kissed him again on the forehead.

"I love you," she said. "I *always* will. Don't worry about me too much if I can't join you. Even if you miss me, I don't want you to ever come back here, because your father might want to trap you here for good. Now go, darling. *Please*."

"I love you, mummy," Lucio said, still crying, more afraid than he'd ever been in his life. "Promise you'll come find me."

"I promise. I love you."

He was reaching for the photograph, his hand shaking. Hermione wanted to fix his hand firmly to it but couldn't, knowing she would be taken along, too.

"Grab it, sweetheart," she encouraged, fear thickening her tongue. "Hold on tight and don't let go. Tell Pansy and your grandparents I love them."

Lucio had changed his mind. He pulled his hand away from the photograph, sobbing, shaking his head. Hermione's heart sank.

There was no time to waste. Hating herself, Hermione cast a charm, her heart breaking as an invisible force took hold of her son's hand and made it grab hold of the photograph. Lucio realized what was happening and cried out in despair, shaking his head, reaching for her with his free hand, but it was too late.

There was a bright flash and a portal opened, black and blue and whirling with magic, distorting the space around itself. Lucio was sucked in, screaming in fear, and the portal closed abruptly, leaving Hermione there alone, fighting the urge to not collapse to the floor in a rush of tears.

Pansy held the sobbing child in her arms, pressing his head into her shoulder, her face pale and wrought with pain.

Hermione's parents were there with her, silent but no less sympathetic, their faces creased with worry for the boy they had been told was their grandson, but to whom they had never been introduced. All they could see was that he was rather tall for his age, and that he had a head full of pale blond curly hair.

They had been sitting in tense silence all evening, waiting but not knowing when exactly to expect anyone until a portal had formed in the space between the couches, and poor Lucio was deposited onto the living room floor, crying hysterically and still holding the bag his mother had given him, prompting Pansy to run to him and sweep him into her arms. He had barely seen her through his puffy-from-crying eyes and reached for her, too upset to be happy to see her.

"I want to go back!" Lucio cried shrilly, his face red with the effort of his crying. "I want to *help*!"

"It's too dangerous, darling," Pansy said, rubbing circles into his back. "I know you want to help, but your mother wanted to save you most of all. If you go back, it will complicate things."

"I don't *care*!"

"I'm sorry," Pansy said, holding back tears. "I really am. But you're safe here with us. And I know your mother is doing her best to join us as we speak."

Lucio's sobs gentled a very little and he sniffled. A river of snot flowed from one nostril.

"She said she has to do something," he said, hiccuping. "*What* is it? Why does she have to face father alone?"

Pansy dared say nothing. All they could do was wait for Hermione to join them, or to carry on and resign themselves to her fate in bleak silence.

"That took a while," Draco murmured.

The tables were being cleared away and the musicians warming up after a brief break. Both Draco and Hermione's plates had remained untouched for the rest of the feast.

She was in his lap, burrowing into his throat, one hand pressed against his chest. He held her securely against him with ease, his strong arms restricting her movement.

"Why did you have to tease him about the surprise?" she admonished him, nipping at his throat with her teeth. "He demanded to know. I doubt he'll get any sleep tonight, thanks to you."

Draco chuckled. "I would have preferred he learn tonight, along with everyone else. *You* insisted he go to bed."

"It's better to wait until tomorrow."

His hand pressed protectively over her stomach. His other hand curled gently around her throat, and he kissed her.

"Shall we?" he asked when he pulled away.

Hermione nodded, unfurling from her position on his lap. Before she could stand, however, Draco picked her up and stood, then set her down carefully onto her feet. Hermione leaned heavily into him, one hand around his back and the other on his chest, her ring and his collar flashing brilliantly under the light.

They were noticed at once and again, the noise died down as the followers looked to their leaders. Hermione finally caught sight of Martin sitting closer to the middle of the room. He was staring at her, expressionless, but when he realized that she'd noticed he flushed a little.

She would have to find time soon to pull him aside, urge him to leave—for the time was growing perilously near. She could sense it, as if Draco's growing anticipation was lending charge to the air around them.

"My faithful," Draco began, "you may be wondering why you've been summoned here tonight with no reason given. My Lady and I have happy news to share: she grows another Malfoy inside her this very moment."

There was a brief second where the news sank in, and then in a rush came the boisterous cheers and more wine flowed. Draco beamed and Hermione followed suit with a smile of her own and moved her hand to settle over her stomach. Her eyes were on Martin, who had a strained smile and clapped along with his table. He seemed paler than normal.

"To the Dark Lord, and the Dark Lady!" somebody roared, and a sea of goblets were raised into the air to mark the toast.

Draco raised his own, but Hermione had nothing to drink. Draco summoned her more water and she took it, raised it in reply to the toast.

"To the future," Draco said, his voice booming over all the noise, "and all the blessings it brings."

He looked to her, silently asking if she wanted to add anything but Hermione shook her head, and everyone took a drink.

Hermione in fact *did* have her own addition to the toast, but it was one best not uttered aloud. Draco had finished his drink and buried his face into her throat, kissing her all over, but she looked into her water for a moment without acknowledging him and then drank, her heart pounding.

To vengeance.

When the din had settled down a few moments after the toast, Draco led Hermione down to meet the congregation below, to receive their congratulations.

There were too many people around her on all sides—Hermione felt as though she were surrounded by noisy insects, wished she could bat them away. Several people would approach them at once to offer their heartfelt congratulations and blessings. Hermione played her part dutifully, thanking them all and touching her belly, allowed Draco to hold her as often as he wanted. It was an absurd circus—she tried picturing Voldemort conducting his matters in such a way, and failed. He had been feared, yes, but he had not been loved, and he probably had not been that respected, either. He had been powerful and terrifying and *unreachable* above all. She could never picture him as Draco was now, smiling and charming yet cool, radiating power all the while, like a silent reminder that everyone he spoke to that they were still beneath him.

Had Voldemort possessed an ounce of Draco's charisma or even faked it, perhaps he might have been revered more. It was chilling to think of.

"A thousand blessings to you and your children, my Lady," said a woman Hermione didn't recognize.

You don't even know me, Hermione thought, but she smiled and thanked her anyway.

Erik approached her and Draco, bowing deeply.

"My most heartfelt congratulations to you both, my Lord and Lady," he said, smiling. "As always, I am at your service."

Then George was there before them, bowing.

"I'm very pleased for you both," he said. "I am sure your family will only continue to thrive, my Lord. I know nobody else so worthy of such success."

"Indeed, neither do I," Draco said, and Hermione fought *hard* not to roll her eyes at his arrogance. "You've been a fine acquisition for my court, George. Your service will be rewarded."

George bowed his head. "I'm most thankful, my Lord."

He turned to leave and another took his place, but as he walked away he turned his head just slightly enough to look back at Hermione. There was no expression or meaning in that look, but Hermione knew exactly what he was thinking.

If they had stayed there to bask in well-wishes long enough for everyone to get their turn, they would have remained there well into the next day. Hermione finally managed to beg

Draco to allow her to leave and use the restroom, using her pregnancy as an excuse. She made her way to the door, scanning the area around her for Martin, wondering how she might find him without making it too obvious. Ultimately, she was saved the effort—he was in the back of the room and close to the great doors, as if he were planning on leaving early. Hermione saw him and looked at him intently. He caught on, bowed as she approached.

“Many congratulations, my Lady,” he said. Then his gaze flicked down to her stomach.

Many couples had begun to dance by then, and the music had grown louder.

Though he hid it well, she could sense his anxiety. She would have loved nothing more than to let him wrap his arms around her, to ask him to stay instead, so that she could tell him it was all a lie.

Do not allow yourself to soften, the warped voice said. *You’ve come so far already. If you hesitate now it may ruin everything.*

She smiled so that anyone who might be watching not notice anything was amiss about the encounter.

“Go,” she said in a low voice. “Now, before it’s too late. Don’t do anything else, just go, and try not to catch anyone else’s attention.”

He nodded and she kept walking to exit the room as if their encounter had no meaning at all, as if crucial words had not just passed between them.

The doors closed behind her and Hermione went upstairs, not actually needing to use the restroom, but she went back to the nursery and took the envelope holding the second photograph and put it into her pocket. But back in the banquet room, Draco remained where she had left him, and he had watched her and Martin’s brief exchange with great interest. The moment his wife left the room and he saw Martin following suit as if he intended to meet with her outside, Draco moved toward him.

Martin had just decided that he would linger for a minute more, to not look suspicious. To excuse his early departure before Lord Malfoy would only make him suspicious so he would forego it and risk being thought of as rude.

He turned toward the doors, only fifty steps away, and casually looked around as if he were searching for someone. Hermione’s warning weighed on his mind.

She did not want him to stay—what exactly was going to happen? Could it be any worse than when she and Lord Malfoy had copulated openly before everyone else, drinking each other’s blood?

He made his way over to the door—a little closer and a little closer. Didn’t dare look back to gauge where the Dark Lord was, for he feared he might catch him watching. Even now he felt that chilling sensation of being stared at, but he hoped it was George, or *anyone* else. It was making his heart race. If he ignored it and managed to get past those doors, he could break into a run until he reached the Apparition point in the foyer and head home to safety to wait for Hermione.

Just a few more steps—

“Leaving so soon?” came the Dark Lord’s voice from behind him.

Martin froze, his stomach dropping. So he *had* been watching.

He turned, bracing himself as he did so—and found nothing. Confused, he looked back in the original direction he’d been heading, and jumped again, finding Lord Malfoy now standing there, blocking his way to the door.

Maybe it was because Martin was frightened, or maybe it was because he’d had a fair amount of wine by this point, but there was something different about the Dark Lord that Martin couldn’t quite identify.

“Pardon me, my Lord,” Martin said, trying to catch his breath as he bowed. “I had need of a restroom.”

It was the *wrong* thing to say, but he didn’t know it. The Dark Lord’s eyes narrowed.

“Ah, but the fun isn’t over yet,” he said. “I won’t have you miss a second of it. Stay. This is a celebration, Martin. Do you see anybody else trying to leave?”

There were quite a few people looking at them. Martin was beginning to sweat.

“N-no, my Lord,” he said.

The Dark Lord’s smile widened, and Martin almost reeled back, for all his teeth were sharp points.

“Then you better not disappoint me,” he said. “Or my wife—I believe she’ll be rather upset if you leave now.”

The look in his eyes was the most unfriendly one he’d ever issued to Martin yet, and it was the combination of those words and that look that with a shock that Martin realized that his and Hermione’s secret had somehow been found out.

When? He thought, panicking. *Merlin, if he knows and wants me to stay—does he plan to kill me tonight?*

“George,” the Dark Lord called, and instantly the tall red-headed man appeared by his side, bowing his head. “I want you to accompany Martin here for the rest of the night. See to it that he stays—and that he lays a low profile.”

“Yes, my Lord,” George said, and after a second’s pause, the Dark Lord finally left. George moved in to stand closer to Martin, who at that point was red and nearly dripping with sweat, his heart racing.

He looked around nervously—had Hermione returned? Had she seen? Might she be able to help him?

“What did he mean, lay a low profile?” he asked, and then in a lower tone. “I’ve-I’ve really got to go home. My father took ill again. I meant no insult.”

George only looked at him and reached out, grabbed him by the elbow.

Martin heard no spell being cast but felt a strange rush of magic on the top of his head that subsequently slid down his spine and then the rest of him.

He felt cold. Strangely light. Martin looked down at himself and saw that he was translucent. Nearly invisible.

“No,” he said, uncomprehending. “Wait—”

“It’s too late,” George said quietly. Was that a tinge of pity in his tone? Martin’s emotions were running too high to focus. “You should have been faster.”

She had to be careful to not display her upset before going back downstairs. After the unbearable pain of forcing her son to leave, Hermione had to force her composure back into what it had been beforehand. It wouldn’t do for anyone to see that she had been crying, or that she no longer had the patience for politeness when all she wanted to do now was get this over with and claw her way back to her son.

This frustration bit into her repeatedly but even then, Hermione knew it was not the time to act—Neville and Luna still owed Draco their answer. Though Hermione would still have liked to take them along with her, she knew Luna was right. Though she had the power to force them to escape, it would only increase the risk of the plan going badly, and she wouldn’t abuse her power to force them to do something they didn’t want—if they joined Draco, or rejected him, then that was their choice, and she would honor it as she would honor her promise to George.

Let it all end, she thought distantly. All I care about is Lucio and Pansy getting free, and making Draco suffer.

Had he even sensed that his son was gone? Was he even *faintly* aware that he was being played? It was the greatest testament to his arrogance and conceit that she had been able to reach this point at all, that he’d never openly suspected her ulterior motive, that she would simply acquiesce without one final attempt at retribution.

Well, *good*. She would enjoy seeing the shock on his face when she tore it all down.

Draco collected her immediately after her return to the banquet hall. He’d come up to her, smiling, and swept her into a waltz around the floor, while the other couples who had already been dancing got off the floor to allow all the attention to go to their Lord and Lady.

Hermione, having not seen sign of Martin on her return, felt *slightly* more at ease. As Draco led her in the first dance and then another she thought of Lucio with a raw heart and hoped that he had arrived safe and sound, but outwardly she gazed at her husband with admiring, excited eyes and a smirk on her lips.

The hearty applause, given once their dances ended, followed them up to the dais. Hermione chose to sit with Draco on his throne again. He was in a terribly good mood, his eyes shining with satisfaction and desire. Hermione kissed him, let him nibble on her bottom lip.

Please him now. Destroy him later.

Please him now. Destroy him later.

Please him now. Destroy him later.

How long now had she had that drilling into the back of her mind?

The time was almost upon them. It felt a bit like a dream, lingering in this constant state of anticipation, her body taut and ready to strike. She kissed Draco's throat and he tilted his head, let her suck on his skin and worry it with her teeth to leave matching marks on him like the ones he'd given her after the ceremony.

When her fangs pierced him he moaned, and his hips shifted like he wanted to thrust into her at that very moment. Hermione smiled, his blood gushing into her throat and dripping down her chin, so tangy with desire and hot like heated honey. The first swallow was a rush of heat and never enough to satisfy—even when she bit him with the intent of taking a little, she always ended up drinking much more. The strange, erotic and hypnotic motion of the act gripped her every time, and she knew it was the same for Draco.

She drank deep, feeling the eyes of many on them, feeling Draco's hands tight around her like he wanted her to take it all.

You beautiful fool.

Could she take enough to weaken him the way he'd done to her? Would it actually work? Well, she was going for it regardless.

The music below was loud and heavy, filling her head, its deep reverberations matching the thrumming of her heart, almost hypnotizing her, too. She sucked at him like it was the only thing she knew how to do and Draco, without any help from her, ejaculated in his trousers twice, moaning softly into her ear, his lips brushing against her temple, the tendons in his neck standing out prominently.

Hermione didn't know how long it had been since she had begun but felt more than able to continue—unfortunately, Draco had other ideas. Though he too would have loved to stay there in their throne with his perfect wife sucking at his throat, he sensed a lull in the party below and knew it was time to announce their victory. At length, he discreetly magicked away his mess and then reached up to take Hermione's chin with his thumb and forefinger—it was slippery with blood and Hermione, lost to the spell of feeding, didn't notice. Her eyes were closed, her nose pressed into his throat—she gave a swipe of her tongue to catch some tendrils of blood that leaked freshly away from the main stream and Draco shivered with pleasure.

"Firebird," he said. Then repeated it, squeezing her chin gently to snap her out of her trance. He leaned away from her a little, feeling his flesh, snagged by her teeth, pull taut. Hermione resisted, her hands full of his robes, holding him close, and *growled*.

Draco nearly went faint with desire. Would have loved nothing more than to gather that feral little animal into his arms and make love to her once more upon his throne. But there was an important task at hand to be dealt with, first. He caught a glimpse of Longbottom and Lovegood in his peripheral vision, and remembered that too must be dealt with tonight.

“Hermione,” he said, his voice firm, tapping her lightly on the temple.

It worked. She blinked, faltered. Draco used that momentary distraction to break free. He felt her sharp fangs slide from him in a way that would have been extremely painful for any normal person but to him felt like the scratch of a blade of grass against metal.

Blood had stained her lips and chin, and her eyes were a little wild—Merlin, but she was the most enchanting creature. Draco smiled, reached up to thumb away a smear on her cheek.

“You may drink of me as much more as you please when it’s just us later,” he said, “but we have pressing matters to deal with, my love.”

She was blinking, trying to clear the fog in her mind.

“Yes,” she said a moment later, and her voice sounded a little odd... *warped*, somehow. “Of course.”

He helped her off his lap and stood from his throne. The noise immediately began to die below, and the couples still dancing began to leave the floor, knowing that Draco was about to speak again.

Hermione was wiping at her lips. Draco brushed away a tendril of hair from her forehead and they locked gazes.

“You know what’s coming,” he said softly. “What I expect of you.”

She nodded and he led her to the center of the dais. Everyone had been watching them (some discreetly, some not) and were now waiting, knowing there was more to be said.

Draco looked at Neville and Luna, and they had their eyes on him already. He gave them a pointed look, and gestured to the middle of the floor. They obeyed, and went there together with everyone else watching and moving away, making a large space around them.

“My people,” Draco announced, his voice booming as he gestured grandly to Neville and Luna, who now stood in the center of the floor, quite alone. “You see before you two strangers. Both have entered my home recently under the binds of servitude to me. You may have wondered who they are, and you may have spoken to them inquiring so, only to receive vague answers. Let there be no more mystery.”

He made a sharp motion with his hand, yanking it upwards into the air, as if he held an invisible sheet and was uncovering something with it.

At the very same moment, Neville and Luna both staggered a little in tandem, and their disguised appearances were no more, revealing their true identities.

There were some loud gasps around the room, and at the same time many jeers and hate-filled threats were thrown out at them, for what Neville had done at Knockturn had affected several families in attendance, and the horrific day had yet to be forgotten. Draco allowed it all, smirking, watching as Neville and Luna went paler and paler still, confronted with the vitriol lobbed against them. It created such a cacophony in the room that Hermione wished she could cover her ears.

He finally held up his hand and the crowd was swiftly silenced.

“Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood,” Draco said, taking obvious delight in the surprise of his followers. “The last of Potter’s legacy, and the rebellion he failed to strengthen. I had the Aurors falsely report their deaths, and I brought them into my home and have bound them to my will. Shall I show you?”

The crowd assented eagerly. Neville and Luna looked warily to Draco, awaiting his order.

“Show them your marks, both of you,” Draco said to them. “Smile for them. Be good sports about it.”

Unable to disobey, they did. Hermione watched stoically from beside Draco, though inside she felt nothing but disgust at Draco’s display.

Neville and Luna rolled up their sleeves and revealed their marks, smiling like their dearest wish had been granted by being forced into servitude.

“Now,” Draco said, “Longbottom. Lovegood. I have housed and kept you in good condition. I have fed you, allowed you to retain your magical ability within the bounds of my comfort. Would you say your treatment here has been satisfactory?”

“You have been very fair, my Lord,” Neville said flatly. His eyes seemed dull.

“We are thankful,” Luna said, her tone equally void of emotion.

“Good,” Draco said. “Now I believe, before we continue, that you owe me an answer.”

There was a pause as his words sank in for everyone. Neville hesitated before answering, casting one important glance at Luna, who nodded, her face ashen.

“Your offer was very generous, my Lord,” Neville said, raising his voice. “We’ve talked it over in detail and come to the same conclusion.”

“And what is your decision?”

“We refuse it,” Luna said. “We will not join you for any price or promise.”

A ripple of shock passed through the room.

The open defiance of the Dark Lord seemed to have given Neville courage—his shoulders were squared and he glared openly at Draco now. Luna had taken a fighting stance with her legs apart and her arms held slightly away from her body, ready to cast a defensive spell if need be—not that she could.

There were discontented murmurs around the ballroom from the other followers.

Draco, for his part, appeared *offended*. Like he had expected them to fall to their knees in gratitude and accept his offer. She saw a flash of red in his eyes, the flare in his nostrils.

“You are certain this is your answer.”

“Yes,” Neville and Luna said in unison, without adding on the honorific. Another offense to the Dark Lord’s face, right in front of everyone. Hermione’s heart skipped a beat, admiring their bravery, their foolishness.

They’d done it on purpose. What reason did they have to be afraid of punishment now? They were about to die regardless. The room was utterly still in shock and anger at the two

who would so callously defy the Dark Lord.

Neville sank to his knees suddenly, screaming in pain. Luna tried to rush to him, but she fell next, landing on her side, clutching her stomach, crying out shrilly from Draco's Cruciatus. They writhed on the floor, to the delight of those watching around them.

Hermione watched, forcing herself not to emote or intervene. They had made their choice. She knew what she must do.

Forty seconds of excruciating pain and screaming passed. The screams filled the room. Draco's eyes were alight with malicious glee.

"You're both fools not to realize the opportunity I gave you," Draco said, his voice rising above the screams, his voice cold. "Anyone else with more sense would have fallen to their knees weeping with gratitude. Look at all I've done for you, yet you choose to be ungrateful."

Hermione could take no more and touched his hand, broke his concentration. The screaming stopped abruptly.

Enough, she said to Draco with a stern glance. *I'll do the rest.*

He nodded, a little dissatisfied. Then looked back down at Neville and Luna, who were still recovering on the floor, reaching for each other.

"It would give me every satisfaction to wipe the life from you both," Draco said, and they looked up at him, exhausted but still in defiance. "But I promised that pleasure to my lady wife, who has her own quarrels with you."

He took Hermione's hand and kissed it.

"You know what to do, my love," he said. "Make me proud."

Hermione nodded, toed off her shoes, and stepped down from the dais and onto the ground floor.

An undercurrent of excited whispers rose steadily from the silence.

"At last," someone whispered. "She kills again."

"Make them suffer!"

"Can you believe the impertinence!"

Neville and Luna watched her come forward, struggling to rise to their feet. The hostility in their eyes faded but the wariness remained. There was nowhere else for them to go, and there was no chance they could escape the room or defend themselves. They were surrounded on all sides, and Draco's magic would never allow them to slip away.

Luna stood firm, her chin raised and her eyes on Hermione's—not defiant, nor angry, but gentle. Sorrowful. Neville stood beside her, their hands clasped together tight, his jaw set and his eyes dull, accepting of his nearing end.

Everyone was watching her. Hermione couldn't let her mask fall, but still hoped they knew she would take no pleasure from this.

Now Neville caught her eye, gave a small nod of reassurance.

I'm ready, he seemed to say through them. Luna, too, seemed to say this with her eyes.

Hermione walked forward, her bare feet shocked by the cold stone flooring with each step. Would not look away from them but only to blink.

Draco had followed her off the dais and began walking over to join her where she stood, but Hermione held out her hand to stop him in his tracks so he would come no further.

Stay there and don't intervene, she ordered him privately. *I don't need help*.

As you command, my Lady. She could sense his excitement still. He sounded so proud.

There were so many eyes on them, on her. Hermione was well used to this, to being an unwilling part of a spectacle. Draco had been training her for this all these years, had he not? The weight of his constant stares had hardened her shoulders and back, made them almost impenetrable. They no longer affected her. Not the paparazzi for the newspapers, not the gossips who surrounded her, not even Draco's followers. They were nothing to her. No better than insects buzzing around the freshest kill, so unaware of the dwindling hours until their demise.

When she had reached Neville, she reached out and took his face in one hand, her palm cupping his cold cheek.

His eyes were growing wet. Glazed with exhaustion. Not a trace of anger or despair.

He had been broken.

As I have.

Let us rest, his gaze seemed to say.

Why must it all fall to me? She thought briefly. *Why do I bear the hardest tasks? Will I ever be able to heal?*

Her heart ached. Easy enough to ignore but she clung to it for a moment, to that pain, that distant emotion. The familiarity of sadness, of lost love. Remarkable that she was still able to feel anything at all despite the slow creep of the Horcrux's influence. It weighed on her outstretched arm and she looked deep into her former best friend's eyes, hoping that what she felt was being conveyed in her gaze despite her mask of neutrality.

It was, and was mirrored in his eyes. That was a comfort. It would not alleviate the ache, but it was enough.

Something pressed into her unoccupied hand. She recognized the dagger at once by its jeweled hilt—Draco had sent it to her. She grasped it. It was familiar and warm—too warm for something that was supposed to be inanimate.

But it's alive, isn't it?

She probed it with her magic, too, thinking perhaps Draco had misled her, that perhaps this truly was her Horcrux after all, out in plain sight. But the result was negative.

This was a conduit of some sort. She had seen it absorb Danielle's blood; the very blood that still coursed through it now, she could tell. There was the faintest pulsing in her hand as she held it, growing steadily stronger, as if it knew what was coming. As if its hunger had

grown. Strange that she could feel it in such a way—like called to like, and she remembered Draco saying that her own blood had been infused into the cursed item as well.

And now it will eat again.

This cursed item had helped create her Horcrux. If *this* artifact felt so terrible, what did the true item feel like? This might be a key but the door was invisible, and the time to search for it had run out.

She didn't want Neville's and Luna's blood captured in such a vile object.

They were staring at the dagger too, also affected by its presence.

Hermione let out a long, cool breath.

"You all lost the moment he took me," she said. "It was over as soon as it began. I know it now, too."

Neville's eyes closed slowly, his bleeding lip wavered. He nodded, acknowledging his guilt.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," he whispered. "I know it's not enough, but I'm sorry."

"I haven't been Hermione for a long time."

Anger and hatred filled her like smoke, choking her from within. Neville hung his head and nodded.

"And I've waited for this day for so long."

"We won't fight," Luna said softly. "We just want this to be over."

Hermione gave them a long look, her lips tightening into a flat line.

"I do, too," she said, and for a moment her voice sounded like its normal self, but it was short lived. "Let's end this, then."

There had been no fear in his eyes before but now there was alarm there, rising rapidly. She could not see her features sharpening subtly, her limbs growing longer so that she stood above them, her dark brown eyes turning red and shining with a menacing glare. There were shocked, gleeful whispers from the crowd behind Neville and Luna.

"Witness them!" Hermione cried out suddenly so that everyone else could hear, spreading out her arms. "The Dark Lord's great opponents in their final moments."

A cheer arose from the surrounding crowd mixed with some taunts aimed at Luna and Neville. She could not see him as he was standing a short distance behind her, but Draco was grinning, his eyes gleaming with pride as he watched.

"First came Potter, and my husband killed him," she said, beginning to circle the doomed pair, her dagger pointing at Neville from the end of an outstretched arm. Her eyes gleamed manically. "And then you took his place. Do you really think so highly of yourselves?"

"Fools!" somebody cried.

"Cowards!" a voice boomed.

“Make them bleed!”

Neville bore it all silently, his face like a stone, betraying nothing except for his wary eyes, which followed Hermione like she was a serpent preparing to strike. Luna stood beside him faithfully, her hand turning white from the pressure she held his with.

“You have no achievements of your own so you sought to topple someone else’s,” she continued, her lip curling in contempt. There was a strange creaking sound—her fingers had grown longer somehow, and sharp, long talons had burst from the tips of her fingers, replacing her fingernails. “You raised a rebellion weaker than the last. You left your friends to *die*.”

There was a tight twitch of his eye. She hoped he was picturing Danielle now, and she hoped it hurt. Former friend he might be, but he was no innocent, either, and what he had done to Danielle and to his grandmother still haunted her from the moment she had learned about each of them.

The crowd was becoming more and more energetic, jostling each other for a good view, their bloodthirsty shouts filling up the large chamber, mixing into an awful jumble. Hermione kept track of where the thickest mass of people was in the back of her mind.

“You offered to help me,” she added. “As if I was not beyond saving by that point. You hatched your brave, foolish plan to save me but failed to realize that *I didn’t want your help*.”

Draco was leaning forward where he stood, his stare hungry and sharp, fixated on his wife. Nothing could have pulled his gaze away from her.

She was coming closer to Neville now, until the tip of the blade was only just scratching the front of his shirt. His eyes had never left hers and though he flinched, he remained standing straight. The crowd became even louder than he thought possible, clamoring for his and Luna’s deaths like they were watching a horse race rather than this twisted demonstration.

“You sought to rip me from my husband.”

Her voice had gone low and mean. Her eyes were such a fright. Neville fought to remember what they had looked like years ago when she had been innocent and free. The delicate veins around her eyes had become darker, more prominent, looking like they were infected.

“You sought to ruin his happiness and destroy his legacy.”

She took two steps back, and the hair on Neville’s arms raised as he felt a strange tingle spread across him. He frowned but couldn’t focus on it when he was too aware of his looming death.

Hermione’s voice was even lower now. She had lowered the dagger, held it at her side, her stance relaying that she was ready to strike. Neville steeled himself, waited for the inevitable, squeezing Luna’s hand so tight he feared he might crush her bones.

“How *dare* you try to take that from me. The right to vengeance is *mine*.”

Quicker than a viper, she raised her *wand* and slashed a wide arc across the air, throwing herself into the motion, a snarl contorting her face. There was a terrible arc of green light that

blinded the room, hurtling forward with the power she had put into it, slicing audibly through the air.

Years of hatred and pain had gone into that cast. Its power was unparalleled, and there was hardly any time to avoid it.

It hit Neville and Luna first, and then with the sound of tearing flesh and torn-up fabric, hit the rest of the room, so powerful that once it had cleaved through all the bodies behind Neville and Luna, it gouged a huge slash into the walls and doors behind them, and then dissipated. Neville felt it slice through his chest, ripping through his insides cleanly, but he felt no pain—he was transfixed, horrified, staring at Hermione, at the creature her hate had turned her into. He fell heavily to the ground, and did not hear or see the shockwave impact the rest of the congregation, whose bloodthirsty cries had been swiftly cut off.

Then she did it again in the other direction, and then again, taking care of the stragglers her original attack had not taken care of—moving so fast Neville could barely track her with his eyes.

It had happened so suddenly, had taken everyone by such surprise that nobody had time to see it coming, or even try to defend themselves. One moment everyone had been standing, and less than three seconds later the ground was littered with dismembered bodies.

The ground was cold underneath him and he struggled for breath, felt his own blood gushing out of him. He had been sliced nearly in two but still felt no pain—was Hermione responsible for that? A small act of mercy in the midst of her anger—it comforted him somehow. His vision was spotting all over and he was losing consciousness. Blood welled and bubbled from his mouth and his left hand lay a short distance away from him, fully severed. He reached for Luna, fear for her wellbeing overriding everything else. It was impossible to turn his head to look for her and a brief panic overtook him, but he felt her hand grasp his weakly from beside him still. She was growing cold fast.

“I love you,” he heard her whisper, her voice ragged and distant. He tried again to look at her and failed. He struggled to speak—could only continue to squeeze her hand, even when it went limp a moment later. Tears leaked heavily from his eyes.

The sudden absence of yelling and laughing hit him but he could hardly look around and see what was happening to the others. Couldn’t feel any part of his body except his face, and it was still a struggle to speak. Beyond the rushing of his own blood and his struggling gulps for air, there were multiple other sources of cries of pain and fear and confusion.

Of dying breaths.

He felt his blood soaking into the fabric of his clothing as he stared up at the ceiling and waited to die. The strangest relief took over him little by little.

It’s over, he thought, staring helplessly up at the ceiling. *It’s over. Finally.*

Hermione was in his vision suddenly, blocking out the ceiling and she was crouching down, coming closer, holding his face in her hands. They were hot to the touch. She no longer held the wand she had killed him and Luna with, and as for the dagger, he hadn’t seen what she had done with it either.

She was a creature now, not the Hermione he had known. Her changed features would have made him gasp in horror and recoil if he had that capacity for movement and breath but it had left him and so he only stared, opened his mouth to speak, to take one final chance.

Her eyes were not human, and they were still red and shining, but not from malice. She quickly crawled to Luna, saw that she was gone (but not as cut up as Neville was), gently closed her eyes, and then went back to Neville.

Neville recognized pain in her blood red eyes. Her unsettling hands stroked his hair from his face gently, taking pains not to cut him by accident. Grief ravaged her face and she made no move to hide it. A tear dripped from her eye and landed on his bare arm.

He realized that despite her transformation he still recognized her there in its depths. Her teeth were sharp but her lips were unchanged, and her eyes were red and bright but the same original shape, and her hands sharpened, but her skin was still soft and warm, and she still had her recognizable curls.

“Sleep now,” she sobbed quietly, her voice still distorted but gentle. “Find Luna. I’m sorry. I forgive you.”

Her lip quivered the smallest fraction. He fancied he could hear her voice in his head, clear as day, as light and gentle as it had once been.

He tried to nod but could not feel anything below his chin. Darkness was closing in and he was losing vision rapidly. His breath was getting stuck in his throat as his systems failed him. It took every modicum of strength he had left to utter anything, but he managed to speak. His final breaths rattled loudly.

“Fhhurgiv yu. Llluhv y—”

Another tear splashed onto his cheek.

As he faded, his eyes rolled from her, not of his own accord, and he caught a glimpse of Draco still standing a short distance away, looking the most stupefied Neville had ever seen him. He thought of all the dead bodies of the Dark Lord’s followers around him and Luna, of how thoroughly Hermione must have played him and died smiling, still holding Luna’s hand.

Hermione felt him go still and heavy in her arms. His eyes were half-shut and his lips wore a faint smile. Her vision was swamped with tears—she blinked them back.

We are not finished yet, the voice said. Grieve later.

The ache in her heart was stronger than before, and rising, to her confusion.

There were bodies in her peripheral vision on each side. She could still feel Neville’s last breaths, how they’d rattled in her ears.

I did what I had to.

A flash of something behind her caught her eye—Hermione whirled, expecting to see Draco, and instead saw George on the ground, lying on his back and struggling to breathe.

He must have been way in the back of the crowd, as he seemed more intact than most of the bodies she could see. Hermione knew of all the people in that crowd, George would have

had the reflexes and the instinct to save himself right on time, perhaps to dive out of her aim and Apparate behind her—but why? Hadn't he wanted this?

Blood welled from his mouth in a thin line but his eyes were aware and on her.

"You did it," he said, giving her a weak grin. "That was incredible."

Hermione went to him, felt his pulse. Still strong. There was a gash across his side but it was not enough to kill him, and though the puddle of blood underneath him looked grim, Hermione knew he had a chance of survival—only if that wound was tended to immediately.

He took her wrist, met her eye. He didn't seem afraid or even repulsed by her appearance.

"I've betrayed you one last time," he said, sounding a little remorseful. "Even if it was an order. My Lord had me make sure he witnessed everything, though I don't think even He expected all this."

He gave a pained jerk of his head to the side and Hermione saw Martin, half-covered by a concealing spell that was rapidly fading from the rest of his form, staring at her in utter horror.

Hermione's stomach sank to the floor. If George had accepted and been proud of her actions, Martin was the opposite. He was thankfully intact except for a long cut on his arm that had shredded the sleeve of his shirt and grazed skin.

He didn't say a word. Hermione took a step to him, her words faltering. He shrank back immediately.

"What have you done?" he asked, his voice thin as a reed from fear. He looked around, taking in the carnage.

"Did you think I would escape without shedding blood?" Hermione asked. He cringed at her changed voice.

"After everything I've been through? I was owed my revenge. I've waited for this for years."

It was the wrong thing to say but she didn't care, and meant every word. She had bided her time and played Draco's ridiculous game all this time waiting for this very moment. Draco was still standing there in complete, frozen shock, but was watching her and Martin and George.

"Don't you dare move," Hermione warned him, casting her husband a vicious look. "And don't say a word. I'll deal with you in a moment."

Draco looked at her current form, thunderstruck. He tried to move, to come closer to them, but his feet would not lift to the floor, bound by his wife's order.

Martin was shaking, at a loss for words.

"My Lady," George said.

"You can drop the pretense," Hermione said gently. "I was never a Lady."

"You always will be, to me," George said, clutching at his wound with his other hand. The puddle of blood underneath him had grown larger, and he was chalky pale now. That chance of survival was dwindling fast.

He met her eye. "You promised me—please. I want to see Fred again."

Hermione took out her wand once more. She brushed his hair from his face.

"Thank you for still being a friend," she said. "Despite everything."

"I think we both know too well how horrible it is to be alone for so long," George said. "I know this was all for your own revenge, but there were many in this room I was especially glad to see die—and Fred would have been glad, too. Thanks."

"I hope you find him," Hermione said, and George noticed how her eyes were flickering now, from red to brown, back and forth. "And I hope you find Harry, too. And Ron. And Ginny, and Neville and Luna."

He squeezed her wrist comfortingly. "I hope so too, my Lady. Thank you."

And then he made himself relax, wincing a little from pain, signaling with his eyes that he was ready.

Hermione leaned forward to kiss him on the cheek, touched her wand to his chest, and there was a flash of green light. Martin gasped.

George's hand fell away from Hermione's wrist. His eyes were peaceful, still staring at Hermione. She reached over, closed his eyelids.

She remained there for a moment, observing his body, her eyes going red again. Behind them, all the bodies were completely still and quiet. Draco still remained trapped where she had made him stay, shaking his head in disbelief. The reality of what had happened was finally setting in, but it only confused him more.

But Hermione would deal with him last.

Martin was still frozen, staring at her, mesmerized with fear.

"This is why I didn't want you to stay," she said, rising from the floor. "Because I knew if you did, you would look at me the way you are now."

"So you wanted to hide this from me. You've killed *everyone*," Martin said. "Wouldn't it have been enough to just flee?"

He didn't understand. How could he? He hadn't lived with her pain. Hermione took a step toward him and saw that her feet were coated in blood, and her skirt was drenched in it, too. Martin noticed this, too, and winced.

It stung. Hermione wanted to explain that no, fleeing wouldn't have been enough—that she had fled time and time again, but now she finally had the power to fight, and *hurt*. Draco had spent years building up his following, throwing bribes and threats around with all the arrogance in the world. He had crafted his own court, had built up his own significance and wealth and power just so he could continue to get away with whatever he wanted. And he had expected her to happily sit on her throne like this was what *she* had wanted, too.

It didn't matter. He saw her for what she was and was horrified. And worst of all, he didn't understand.

"Do you still want to come with me?" she asked, knowing his answer.

"No..." Martin said, looking aghast. "How could I?"

How could I be with someone like you?

That made her want to laugh. The tears she had left were too precious to waste on him.

"Then go," she said simply. "You were a good distraction while it lasted. I won't keep you here."

"My Lady," he said, hesitating. "I'm sorry. But I—I can't—"

"I wish you the best," Hermione said curtly. "Now *get out* before I wake my husband from his stupor and takes his rage out on you, for I won't stop him if he does."

Martin backed away slowly, staring at her as if he expected her to attack him. That stung too, but Hermione only cast one last look at her dead friends, and it was only when she did so that she heard him turn about hard and sprint out of the room.

The hardest parts are over, whispered the voice to her. *Now finish it.*

The door shut heavily behind him and finally, she turned to face Draco.

Draco had watched these interactions as if separated through a heavy, warped panel of glass. There had been so much noise in one instant and then near total silence in the next as his followers died around the room.

And his wife, the cause of it all.

He thought perhaps it had been a dream at first, as if had happened so quickly.

Victory had been in his fist. It had crumbled to nothing but ash. What had she done?

He had watched her go from Lovegood's body to Longbottom, crouched on her knees, holding him, *crying*. And then to George like some angel of death, giving him that green light Draco knew George wanted so badly.

'You promised,' he had heard him say. So they had agreed on this *beforehand*.

He wanted to stop her—but he was frozen by her order, staring at the dead masses below, at the ruins of their celebration.

He had spent years cultivating this for them. For *her*. And it was gone now.

Loss and defeat were a hollow pit in the bottom of his gut. He shook his head in denial, tried again to move out of place, to take one step—but couldn't. He had allowed her to rule him and now had to follow her order whether he liked it or not. The depths of her deception were dawning on him slowly, and it was staggering.

He had to get to her. Find out what she'd done. Perhaps it had been an accident. She had been so eager. She had *wanted* this. Surely she would not betray him now.

She had mentioned something about revenge to Martin—it surprised him. What was revenge if not a life well-lived? She was pregnant, living in comfort, as powerful as he. If all she wanted was revenge, wouldn't it have been enough to take it out on Neville and Luna?

She approached him silently, not one bit of fear anywhere on her. Draco met her eyes, beheld them with some shock.

He had seen the start of her transformation, but never the whole thing. Not until now.

She had lied to him. Made him believe her powers were still largely undiscovered and underdeveloped, but clearly she had been honing them for some time.

He cast a glance around, saw the bodies, and it finally registered that this had been no accident. Not a soul had survived but he and his wife—and Martin, the spare. That must have been her intent all along.

I should have killed him when I had the chance.

No matter. He could be easily hunted down.

The ground was rumbling underneath them all, growing in magnitude the closer she got to him.

Draco frowned, looking around. He was angry and upset, but the commotion was not his doing.

It was her.

She finally stopped before him and the chamber rattled in a way one never should, and the building itself *swayed* from side to side. Glass shattered, wood splintered, marble cracked and split with deafening blasts.

All the debris somehow avoided them—Draco noticed the faint outlines of a magical barrier around them both, one she must have cast. She was crouched slightly, staring right at him with those vengeful eyes, appearing absolutely unfazed by her power. Pure hatred showed in her gaze.

Draco could only watch in awe—and a tinge of fear.

There was another great blast, the sound of rock crumbling all around—he sensed somehow that they were *sinking*. The manor creaked and swayed and groaned but stayed largely intact, and there was a prolonged, violent lurch downward. He felt it like a swoop in his gut, felt his feet leave the ground for a fraction of a second before coming back into contact with the ground. He had to brace himself for the impact, reaching out toward his wife to protect her with his magic, but she again seemed unaffected by what was happening around them, standing easily under all the ongoing destruction.

At last was a deafening crash, and the chamber and the manor around them gave a perilous wobble, and then the movement stopped. The impact should have obliterated the place entirely but somehow remained standing. Draco couldn't make sense of it. The walls

crumbled terribly, and the furniture in the room, all the tables and chairs, were upended and splintered, torn asunder by the might of his wife.

Sometime during this she had finally undone the magic that held him silent and planted in place. Draco's lips parted as he looked around.

The place was unrecognizable. Shattered.

Bodies lay everywhere. Some were covered in rubble, some broken at odd angles. Blood pooled all over the floor.

Draco thought of Lucio—was she not aware of what damage she might have caused to the other parts of the house? He wanted to shake her, snap her out of this seemingly possessed state.

"Hermione," he called. His voice was hoarse, a little stunned. "Firebird. *What have you done?*"

She tilted her head, watching him.

"What do you think I've done?"

"Was it an accident?"

She smiled, amused.

He came closer, took her by the arms. Shook her gently.

"Why would you do this? You wanted this, too," he asked. "You were happy, Hermione. We were happy."

She looked at him in scorn.

"No. I made you believe I wanted this. I groveled and simpered and fucked you to get my power back, and I waited until we could get to this point, so I could take everything from you, just like you did to me."

Draco's heart sank. He ought to have suspected, really. Multiple times, it had felt too good to be true. But it was still a crushing blow.

"You lied to me."

"Don't act so shocked," Hermione said. "You should have known I was up to something from the start. But you're so desperate for affection you gave in completely. If I'd known how easy it would be to deceive you, I would have done this much sooner."

He was staring at her stomach.

"Are you really pregnant?"

She laughed.

"No, and I'm extremely glad about it."

He blinked, looking so hurt now—strange, Hermione thought, that he was more visibly upset about learning there would be no new heir over the slaughter of his supporters.

"I've had to wait so long for this," Hermione said. "Just to see that look on your face. You really don't know how good this feels."

"Hermione," Draco said sternly, "you're being ridiculous. If you were angry at me, you didn't have to take it out on all our people. Now we'll have to move again and start from scratch just to match the number of people we lost today."

"Yes, I did," she said scathingly. "They were all complicit. It wasn't just about stopping you anymore—it was about stopping *all* of them. If I'd killed you and left, they would have sworn to avenge you and made a new faction. Did you think I'd let that happen? You didn't need them, anyway. You were doing just fine when it was only you."

"Why should I be satisfied with stagnation?" he asked, his voice like a whip. "You'd prefer to dwindle into irrelevancy?"

"Your first mistake was thinking we were important enough to immortalize. You could have been happy with what you were given. You've been privileged all your life and you still resorted to stealing everything you have now."

"And just like I said before," he said, stepping closer, "I'd do it all again. I don't regret a single thing I've done."

She gave him an unsettling smile.

"Except trusting me, apparently."

"If a man can't trust his wife, then what does that make them?" he asked. "You showed me you were ready, sweetling."

"And you were an utter fool to think I'd stopped wanting revenge."

He chuckled at that. "Is that not why I allowed you to mutilate me however you wished? Didn't I say I was your canvas?"

"*You* don't get to decide how and when I heal. You don't decide when it's enough for me. It's fun to cut you up, darling. A fun distraction, indeed, but it's ever so much more satisfying to see all these bodies around you." She gestured behind herself. "Take another look at your congregation, oh Lord of Nothing. Behold what your arrogance has cost you."

"A distraction," he mused, his eyes flashing. He gestured to her stomach. "And that was another."

She didn't reply. Didn't have to.

He laughed—there was no humor in it. It was a sharp and cold sound—enough to hurt one's ears.

"Perhaps I am a fool," he admitted at last. "All along, I knew I still had to be careful. That you might still try to fly away from me. I know you, little bird: always raging against the bars of your cage. You still don't know what's good for you."

"You are a fool," she agreed. "You are *very* easy to manipulate, Draco. So desperate for affection that all I had to do was let you think I was completely yours, that you had your dark

queen at last. All I had to do was offer my body and some sweet words and I've had your balls in my hand ever since."

She came closer, put her hands on his chest. His own came up to cover hers, holding them tight enough to make her wince but her face stayed cold and hateful. Their gazes were locked together.

"You *are* completely mine," he said coolly. "You still made those vows. You willingly bound me to you."

That she could not deny. The forced and forged bond between them were more tangible to Hermione than ever. She reached up, traced his lips with her finger.

"I know," she replied stiffly. "It was the only way to get the right to rule you better. I fully expected you to strike that out."

And he almost had—a very tiny part of him, upon her uttering that part of her vow, had instantly rejected it. But he had been too caught in the spell of his love and the beauty of the moment that he had agreed recklessly like a fool, giving her the upper hand.

Regret coursed through him. She'd done it on purpose, for if he hadn't given her his will she wouldn't have been able to keep him from stopping her.

"Delilah," he murmured, closing his eyes, feeling her touch outline his mouth. His eyes were churning oceans, mesmerizing like the endless dance of waves. "You've settled the score. Your lust for revenge is sated. Let down your dagger and I'll say no more of this. We'll take Lucio and move somewhere new and start over."

He gripped her to him, his eyes equal parts livid and pleading, watching the rage refuse to diminish in her eyes.

"Lay down your dagger, Delilah," he repeated, his grip enough to grind her bones to powder. Hermione still resisted.

"You got what you wanted," he continued. "You've humiliated and deceived me, murdered my faithful. It must be enough."

With a shocking burst of strength, Hermione broke free of his hold and pushed him away.

"Never."

Draco stumbled backwards, watching his wife struggle to regain her composure. She was failing fast.

"This is only the beginning of what I wanted," she snarled. "I wasn't going to let you off so easily, Draco. You deserve a lifetime of pain."

The painting. He had to get her to it, restrain her somehow and perform the enchantment necessary to contain her.

Confusion rang through him. The day had gone from one of the best in his life to one of the worst in such short time. He didn't think he'd ever been so blindsided before.

Where was the loving, obedient, needful wife whom he'd woken up with?

She had deceived him so thoroughly, had probably laughed at him in secret all these months, had tolerated his affections with a sneer behind her smile.

And she was right. He'd fallen for it like a niffler to a glint of gold. He'd given her the very freedoms that had allowed her to do this.

I thought you were ready.

And she had been... for a completely different purpose. Look at what she had accomplished already!

He should have kept a better eye on her, to take note of how her powers were manifesting, instead of leaving her to her own devices. If he could rewind time and go about it properly, this wouldn't have happened.

Draco hadn't felt such fear since the moment he'd taken her ring off initially and watched her magic overwhelm her to the point of shutting her body down.

That same fear, heightened now, filled him.

She was going to leave again—was going to leave their life behind. The thought filled him with such anger that it burned him from within.

I won't let you.

He had to try and restrain her at any cost. Killing her was out of the question—not only because it couldn't be done, but because despite everything, despite the lies and murder, he still loved her.

And I'll never stop, he thought. And I'll forgive you this when you've woken up from this state and come back to yourself. But first, I need to make sure you don't leave this room.

Hermione advanced toward Draco, not caring about avoiding the glass or other debris all over the ground. Glass and splinters of wood and other debris tore and embedded themselves into her feet. It should have hurt but she felt none of it, wholly consumed with the bloodlust that was overtaking her with every step towards Draco, leaving a trail of bloody footprints behind her.

Look at his eyes, the voice told her. He's afraid.

He was trying not to show it. But Hermione saw his eyes dart around the room, panic blaring out its presence in that one glance.

It felt good.

Silence was common in the manor. She had grown used to the oppressive, stifling silences here. But this one, the kind that now reigned outside of her steps, was a different sort.

It was peaceful. She felt unnaturally calm. Wondered if this was what it felt like to sleepwalk.

She took his face into her hands. There was a flare of magic, and he felt heavy chains, cold and smooth, begin to wind around his body, weighing him down as they crawled up his form.

"You know these chains can't hold me," he said, laughing. "And you know that if you run, I'll find you. I always do."

She stroked his cheek. The chains were coiling around him tightly, covering every inch of him. There was a scratch along his temple, healing itself slowly.

"Not this time," she said. "Because I forbid it."

The chains were already beginning to creak. They had reached his arms by now and were winding up along his torso—but all he had to do was flex his magic the smallest bit and in an instant they had all shattered, dropping to the floor loudly. They shredded his clothes as they did so, to the point that his cloak fell to the ground in pieces, and then his coat followed and his shirt bore long, wide rips that exposed his torso and arms.

"Is that so?"

Annoyed, Hermione reached out and took hold of his collar, pulling him to her so they were nose to nose.

"You're going to do exactly what I tell you to do."

He shook his head. She gripped the collar more firmly.

"How long?" he asked stiffly. "How long, Hermione?"

She smiled, her eyes gleaming.

"As long as I want."

"No," he said at once. "You'll never come back."

She merely smiled.

"So what if I don't? I want to live my own life."

"You are my *wife*," Draco retorted, his nostrils flaring. "And despite what you've done today I won't let you live apart from me."

"That isn't for you to decide," she tutted affectionately. "You gave me your will, remember, my love?"

He started to argue—she gripped his jaw, forced him to stop.

"I'm going to leave," she said, enunciating each word clearly. "And you are going to stay here in these ruins and think about what you've done, because everything that happened here tonight is *your* fault."

Outraged, Draco shook his head.

You're being ridiculous, he said to her.

She ignored him.

“You will not come after me and my son or Pansy, or track us in any way. You’ll free Pansy from her vows and allow her to live her life freely and without obligation to either of us. You are not to interfere in *any* way in our lives, Draco. I won’t take no for an answer, and if you breach this agreement in any way, I swear to you I won’t ever come back, and you’ll spend the rest of your existence here, *alone*.”

“You can’t take my heir from me,” he hissed, seething. A vein jumped out in his throat. “He stays.”

Hermione shook her head, quietly triumphant.

“He’s already gone, Draco. He’s safe with Pansy.”

His eyes went wide, realizing at last that not only had his wife conspired against him, but his most trusted servant, too.

She tilted her head. “Do you only care about him because he is your heir?”

“I love my son,” Draco retorted fiercely. “Just like I love you, Hermione. You can’t leave me.”

“Our son deserves to live a normal life, away from the influence of a dangerous man like you,” Hermione said coldly. “But I won’t force him to stay away. When he’s older, if he wishes to see you again then I won’t stop him. I won’t be that cruel—even though you don’t deserve that kindness.”

“Fine,” Draco snapped. “One goes but the other must stay. I won’t let you both go. You stay with me, and we’ll make another.”

“No.”

The resolute tone of her voice, the set in her shoulders... every atom of her being screamed out at him that she was set on this and would not be moved. Their dynamic had shifted irrevocably. Fear and rage continued to spread inside Draco like twin suns, blinding him, making way for desperation.

He gripped her now, reaching forward to wrap his arms tightly around her body.

“Hermione—”

Just as quickly, another chain materialized, thicker and stronger than the previous one. It lashed out, captured his wrist and tore it away from her.

He looked down at it, distracted, pulled against it. This time it held easily, pulling in the opposite direction so that he couldn’t move forward or even touch his wife.

“You ruined my life,” she said, her voice echoing in the large, deadened room. It almost made him flinch.

“Now I’m taking it back. It’s mine to do whatever I please, and that starts with leaving this place.”

He leaned towards her, his eyes bright with fear. More chains were appearing, wrapping around him, dragging him backward. They were stronger, heavier this time, and Draco looked behind himself, saw that they were going to affix him to the wall.

“Hermione,” he said, digging his feet into the ground, refusing to let himself be pulled away.

“Don’t. Don’t leave me.”

He thought of the small and plain landscape painting concealed within his office and summoned it with a charm, his thoughts fraying in panic.

It did appear, floating in the air behind his wife, and she was too distracted watching him that she didn’t notice as it lowered to the floor and lay flat.

Draco began the incantation in his head, still fighting to not be pulled away—the chains were pulled to high tension, creaking once more. But before anything could actually happen his concentration was cut off by the high-pitched grinding of metal on metal—so loud that it reverberated around the room.

Hermione glared, watching his struggle.

His muscles strained visibly as he leaned forward, pulling with everything he had. The effort and the friction of the chains ripped at the last of his shirt, leaving his upper half nude. Cracks in the wall formed, spreading and deepening until at last, it all gave. There was the loud *SNAP*, and the chain broke once again. The thunderous sound of the debris dropping to the floor felt like it could have shattered the earth.

He was there with her in a second, on his knees, his arms wrapped around her hips like an infant who didn’t want to part with their mother. He buried his head into her belly, holding her so tightly Hermione was sure her bones would have fractured were she still human.

She was stiff as a board, looking down at him with no expression on her face but mild disgust.

“And you said I’m the one being ridiculous.”

“Don’t leave me, firebird.”

A bell seemed to be ringing in him, a sort of finality to her actions that warned him he would not see her again. The thought only mounted his panic. He couldn’t imagine living without her, without his beautiful, vengeful, tragic wife. How could he, when their lives were so closely entwined? It was cleaving his heart, or what was left of it, every second that passed without a sign from her that she might change her mind.

“I’ll do anything you ask,” he said, his voice hoarse. “Anything. I’ll forgive you for what you did today. I won’t make you sleep in the same room as me. I-I’ll give you your own house. Just stay with me, sweetling. I can’t be without you.”

“Crucio.”

Draco felt when the pain hit, and it made him stiffen against her and clench his teeth but he was still able to keep his hold on her. The physical pain was there, somewhat subdued thanks to his abilities, but the internal suffering it caused was just as it should be. It burned at his nerves, making him twitch spasmodically—but it was still bearable, as to Draco, the thought of her leaving him was more painful.

She ended it, having gauged his reaction carefully. Draco panted for breath, stars floating across his vision.

Before he could fully recover she cast it again at a higher intensity, and now Draco had to fight not to scream. Despite the agonizing pain, Draco couldn't help but feel pride, realizing this was the first time she had ever used the Cruciatus Curse on him, and the pain was triggering his pleasure—he felt himself growing hard, his cock pushing against the fabric of his trousers. He would have laughed if he could.

Hermione noticed this and scoffed.

“Your perversion truly knows no bounds,” she said. The pain climbed higher and Draco *moaned*, pressing himself against her.

“H-Hermione, *please*.” His voice had been muffled by his face being pressed into her body but now he pulled his head away from her and looked up at her, shaking from the intensity of the pain. Desperation shone in his eyes, making him look so pathetic that Hermione smiled.

Calmly, she reached to stroke the side of his face. His eyes fluttered shut, he leaned into the touch. He was sweating from the effort of enduring the torture. His cock throbbed painfully.

The only time I ever see you this way is when you think you're about to lose me, she said to him.

And then she increased the intensity again. At first it was bearable, but it rapidly surpassed that mark and still Draco took it, grappling against it with all his strength. It climbed higher and higher. Blood dripped from his nose and his resistance was no longer enough—somehow his firebird had grown *too* powerful—he gave in and let out the pained, agonized roar that he had been holding in.

It shook the room around them and shattered one window that had somehow remained intact.

Hermione had never heard a sound so sweet. She shivered with pleasure, watching Draco slide down to the ground, considerably weaker than before, his body still jerking uncontrollably, his eyes rolling back into his head, and it was only *then* that she ended the Cruciatus.

He was flat on his back, his hair damp with sweat, his eyes a little distant and bloodshot, breathing hard. His eyes opened, blank as he regained his bearings, then slowly settled back on her. Such beautiful, empty things.

“Is that enough, wife?” he croaked slowly. Veins had burst in his left eye, leaving it a vivid red. “Have you been satisfied? Have I paid for my crimes?”

She surprised him with a cold laugh.

“No,” she said. “This is only the start of your punishment.”

Draco sat up carefully, hurting everywhere. He hadn't been able to feel such pain in so long—it was almost rejuvenating in a sense. His cock was softening. He had come inside his trousers and the muscles in his back felt stiff.

“If you will not reconsider,” he said, “then you leave me no choice.”

And he began the incantation, reciting it rapidly.

The painting lying on the ground behind Hermione began to glow.

Hermione could not see the magic that reached for her but sensed it instead, and saw his eyeline trained on something behind her. There was no time to glance backwards to confirm what he looked at, but she knew it could only be the painting she’d spied him experimenting with.

Moving quickly, guided by her newfound instincts, Hermione reacted.

Transformation came faster than one could blink. One instant, she was a person—and within a fraction of the second that followed she was a hummingbird, darting out of the way as fast as her wings could manage and then ending that motion by fluidly turning back into her human form several feet away.

The spell missed. The incantation, unfinished, hung in the air, dissipating slowly. Draco stared at her in shock.

Hermione felt electric. Her nerves flared with anger and excitement and magic. The glow around the portrait slowly began to fade—for good measure she motioned to it sharply, watching in satisfaction as an invisible force slashed the canvas to shreds, and the frame snapped into pieces.

“I am not your captive anymore,” she said harshly. “I am Lady of this house and I am free to go as I please.”

He flinched. “Don’t do this.”

A strange golden orb appeared between them, and the floor began to rumble once more. Hermione felt the manor was sinking deeper below the earth’s surface—through the many holes that had appeared in the ceiling she could see the open sky, with stars shining above.

Just how far under had they gone? She hadn’t meant to do *that*. Had her magic gone out of control again?

The golden light floated in a circle around Hermione, and then around Draco slowly.

Hermione frowned.

“What is that?” Draco asked. “Is that you?”

By then she understood. She smiled, looked at him.

“It’s you,” she said. “You broke your vow.”

The golden orb hovered atop his head, and Draco attempted to undo it with magic, to side-step it. It only followed. He frowned now, too, and slashed at the air with his hand, tried to slice it into two. The golden orb was unaffected. It hesitated in the air above Draco’s head for a moment, and then went *into* him. For a moment, it enshrouded his entire body, outlining him in that gold light, shining bright like a miniature sun. Hermione shielded her eyes, her heart pounding.

Draco let out a loud hiss—it gave the sensation of burning without ruining his flesh. He struggled against it as he had done previously and found even his own power was no match for it.

“Let me free,” he demanded, trying with all his might to rend that strange gold barrier from himself, scraping at his skin with his nails. “Hermione—”

“You broke your vow,” she repeated. “You accepted the punishment I set. There’s no fighting it, Draco.”

He tried to pull her to him with magic—nothing happened. He tried a series of counter curses off the top of his head, three in total, and again, nothing set him free.

If the vow was broken, then so be it—Draco loosed a curse in her direction, not aiming to hurt her but to render her frozen so he might take some time to figure out how to free himself. No magic answered his call, and the golden light was fading from him and he felt a strange barrier inside of himself, blocking off the access to his own power.

“You *tricked* me,” he snarled, furious. “All this time, you were lying—it shouldn’t count.”

“You told me to learn the proper time to set fires, and I listened,” Hermione said, walking up to him, kicking the broken painting out of the way. “All this time I’ve been placing my matches at your feet, in your pockets, in your own hands. You accepted them eagerly enough, just as you did with the consequence I set for breaking your vow.”

He remembered clear as day. But it didn’t mean he had to like it—he had never been without his magic before, and it left him feeling lost, bereft. Draco concentrated, tried to use it again to restore the painting, but nothing happened. He was no better than a Muggle. The thought *crushed* him.

“You accepted,” she reminded him. “Don’t look so upset. I didn’t force you to break the vow. You did that on your own.”

“I had to,” he rasped. “You were going to leave. You pushed my hand, Hermione.”

“And now I can leave you more easily without fear.” She reached down, tipped his chin up. “Look at you, my poor, pathetic husband. It’s unfortunate, but I’ll daresay that I’ll miss you.”

Draco sagged to the floor, on his knees.

“Then don’t go.”

“If you’re very good, and follow my orders, I *might* loosen your leash after a while,” she said. “But not until I’m satisfied. Now release Pansy of her contract.”

Draco hesitated—but nodded, and a scroll of parchment that bore a transcript of the vow Pansy had taken at the start of her servitude appeared beside him, bearing her signature at the bottom.

“I release Pansy Parkinson, my *loyal* servant, of all her duties and vows,” he said flatly, and the ink on the scroll ran as if it were still wet, and the scroll went up in flames, the ash floating down to the floor.

His eyes were defeated, his posture slumped as he watched her.

"Firebird," he pleaded softly. "Don't go."

"I must," she replied. "Our son deserves a normal life away from all this corruption. I'll do anything it takes to give him that."

"He's my only child. What was so wrong with his life here?"

"*This* is what was wrong!" she hissed, gesturing to the room around them. "You would have kept pushing your ideal onto him like you did on me. I would never have allowed him to turn out like you, I've told you before. Never."

"He would have accepted it," Draco said. "Just as I did with my father's teachings. If it weren't for your influence he would not be so *weak*."

"He isn't weak, he's normal," she hissed. "He is *good*, and I won't let you corrupt him, too."

"And what about you, then?" he asked, tilting his head, studying her through angry, defensive eyes. "It's too late for you and you know it, sweetheart. Normal will never suit you again. You'll come back."

"Maybe," she said callously. "To see whether you've learned your lesson or died yet."

"You will," he taunted, his tone brittle. "Go live your life, then, sweetheart. Enjoy it. But you know you don't belong there. You're not like them anymore—you'll see. Martin was only the beginning. You might pretend to be human again, might disguise yourself and take on new lovers or friends. But eventually, they'll know the truth, or you'll drift away, unable to relate to them."

She stared at him without expression.

"You can't run from what you are," he said.

"I'm not trying to," she answered. "I'm only taking the time back that you stole from me. I'm going to live the life that I want, for as long as I can."

"How long will that be?" he challenged. "Will you wait to outlive them? Stick around and watch all of them die around you from old age while you stay the same? You'll condemn yourself to that?"

"It will be worthwhile," Hermione said stiffly, "because I'll value every second of it, which I *never* did with you."

His brow twitched, trending downward. Her words had clearly affected him.

"Don't look so upset," she said. "You know it's true, Draco. Even if you annul the marriage, even if you grant me every request I make, it won't be enough. You've had me trapped here with you for much too long. We need some time apart."

"From the moment I put that ring on your finger, I knew I never wanted to be separated from you," he said. "But if you still want freedom that badly, then take it, but stay with me. I'll annul the marriage. I won't seek any more power. We'll live quietly and keep to ourselves for the rest of our lives if you wish. Just don't leave me."

Hermione shook her head. “You don’t understand. I have to. You may have nothing else tying you to your human life, but I do. Lucio deserves to know it.”

She let him go, left him there on his knees.

“I could stay, and torture you for much longer,” she said. “You’d deserve every second of it, and more. But I’d be wasting my own time, since I can’t kill you. And I don’t think I want to do that, either, because you need to suffer for a good long time, first.”

“You’re going to *stay* down here with the manor, and never come up to the surface without my explicit permission,” Hermione said. “And you’re going to bury each and every one of these bodies decently, and you will take nothing from them. Restore the house you like, I don’t care. Those are the *only* things I’ll let you use your magic for. You can figure out the rest on your own without your magic. But those binds won’t leave you until I’ve decided when you’ve served your sentence.”

There was a distant rumbling again, and a shower of debris and rocks filtered through the holes in the ceiling. Hermione looked up and saw the stars were being blocked out—the ground above them was closing back up. It was time to leave, for she refused to be buried alive.

Draco knew this, too.

She grabbed the photograph in her pocket, intending to activate the Portkey—and then let it go. She could do that once she reached the surface, but before she left she wanted to see the extent of the damage from above.

Hermione grabbed him by the torn remnants of his shirt, crushed her lips to his.

He accepted her ferocious kiss, gripping her in return, his hand cradling the back of her head, his hands roaming possessively all over her, as if trying to memorize her form one last time. Hermione did the same, hating that despite her eternal rage aimed at him, that a hideous lust had grown alongside it. Her mouth opened and his tongue rushed in, sliding over her own. His smell enveloped her and she inhaled it greedily, and he was doing the same, bending to press his face to her breasts and then travel upwards to her lips again. Her fingers found the punctures her fangs had left in his throat, which she’d neglected to heal, and pressed down on them with her nails—he hissed, and she let him grab her hair and drag her head backward so he could plant a trail of blazing kisses down her throat.

He made to bite her—she pushed him off.

“That’s enough,” she ordered, panting.

He was watching her, *tears* shining in his eyes.

“Sweetling,” Draco whispered, his voice breaking. “Stay.”

Hermione turned, and without looking back, transformed into a bluebird, and shot up toward the holes in the ceiling and then out of sight. Her movement had been so explosive that she left a small plume of feathers behind—Draco lunged for them, grabbing them into his fist before they could settle to the ground. He watched her dart into the night sky above them through the gaping sections of collapsed ceiling, which revealed the other floors and rooms

above them. He roared after her in pain and anger, loud enough to tumble the stars from the sky, but by then she was gone.

LINE BREAK

It was storming when she emerged from below, flapping her wings hard to keep herself in air, leaving the ruined manor beneath her. Snowflakes big and small pelted her from all angles, threatening to freeze her over before long.

She could not help but look down at the full extent of the destruction she'd wrought.

All and any traces of the manor were gone, eaten up by the ground. The garden and the wrought-iron fence had been dragged down, too, all into that strange darkness.

Hermione had not realized how much her power had grown, to be able to topple the manor in that way—but to sink it below the ground?

A good amount of the trees in the surrounding area had toppled, denting the earth below them.

The crater in the ground was huge—larger than the manor itself. Amidst the white of all the snow that covered the land there now stood out that dark flaw. It was hard to tell from here just how deep it went, but amidst the howling of the wind she thought she could hear a voice, raw and furious and desperate, howling in pain. It went on and on, curdling her blood, until the wind picked up and drowned it out.

Get to the earth's core, if I care, she thought angrily. And never come back out.

But somehow, she had the strange foresight that it would not perish entirely. That, no matter what she hoped, the manor would persist. As for its Lord, well—she had no doubt she would see him again—the question remained as to how changed he might be then—if at all.

She finally looked away.

The place was imbued with such heavy amounts of dark magic, it made sense that it could not be destroyed entirely. Draco had cast too many protective enchantments over it—in fact, she suspected there were large pockets of the rest of the manor that were completely intact. And there was an even stronger suspicion behind that, that both their Horcruxes had not been damaged in the slightest.

The fact that she'd been able to transform again just to fly out of there was reason enough. Even now, she could feel that terrible power thrashing inside her, clamoring to be set loose again. Or, the extent to which she had tortured Draco, and seen him withstand it when it instantly should have killed anyone with a lesser strength.

The realization didn't upset her as much as it would have once. Hermione wasn't entirely sure she wanted to give that power up so quickly. Plus, she still needed it—she, Lucio, and Pansy would have to take great pains from now on to keep their identities hidden. She and Pansy were powerful enough, certainly, and Draco was safely contained below ground, but Hermione would leave nothing to chance. If *anyone* ever came for them, she would fight with every drop of power she had.

There was a mighty sound of rock and dirt tumbling, reforming itself into whole ground bit by bit, but going faster as she watched.

Had she unconsciously made this happen? Or were there other forces at play here? Had Draco lied that he hadn't been behind it? It could have been a desperate attempt to keep her trapped underground with him.

It wouldn't do to stay here and speculate when there were more important matters at hand.

It was over.

She had freed herself, and Pansy, and Lucio—or was this merely a cruel dream?

But the cold wind and her racing heart were too real, and the sobs that wracked her entire body almost hurt with their intensity. If she were human she would have been wailing aloud—the grief and relief and anger that still warred inside her would not abate themselves. Beneath them was victory, too—but she would have time to deal with it all later. Since she was transformed, and a bird could not wail in the way a human could, Hermione was not able to suppress the haunting, mournful notes that she emitted—they poured out of her relentlessly.

It's over, it's over.

I'm free.

A fierce winter wind howled, threatening to blow her in the opposite direction, but she had trained as thoroughly as she could and held her own. It was time to land, and activate the Portkey.

LINE BREAK

Her energy was nearly depleted by the time she descended, making landing softly difficult. Her wings gave out a second before landing and so she tumbled hard and rolled along the frozen ground, too exhausted to even catch herself with magic, but she felt hardly any pain.

She felt herself transform in the midst of the action, so by the time she came to a stop on the icy ground, she was human again and back in her dress, which was still soaked in blood along the bottom, and it was now seeping into the snow around her, creating a vivid, surreal image.

Snow instantly dusted her over. Hermione reached into her pocket, standing, and tapped her finger to the photograph.

Portus.

The blue glow arose, and Hermione tightened her hold on the photo, her hand crumpling it. She closed her eyes and let out a ragged sigh, and the portal formed, dragged her inside, and vanished in the span of three seconds, leaving behind the lonely, wintry landscape where a foreboding mansion had once resided.

LINE BREAK

Everyone else had fallen asleep—it was nigh on four in the morning. They had fought off sleep as much as they could, but as the morning dawned and trudged past, their hope continued to dwindle.

Lucio had ceased crying an hour before, and was now sitting beside Pansy, pale and silent with impossible hope now as they were all still in the living room. The tension in the house refused to depart.

Mr. and Mrs. Granger were on the couch, fast asleep, their faces pinched with worry.

Even Pansy had given in to sleep. There were tears under her lashes, slowly rolling down.

Lucio could not give up his watch. He refused to, and he could not sleep even if he wanted to. The anxiety and sadness inside him simply would not let him rest nor eat.

Where's mother now? He thought for the hundredth time. And what's father doing? Does he know I'm gone?...did he cry?

The mental image of his mother trapped inside the house, fearful and alone, made a fresh wave of tears spill out.

Pansy had reminded him of how brave his mother was. She had told him stories of the incredible things his mother had done when they were both in school, and many of those stories Lucio hadn't even *heard* yet. They had helped distract him a little, but what had helped best was being introduced to his grandparents.

They'd taken one look at him, and recognizing their daughter's features in his face, collapsed into tears.

Pansy had put Lucio down onto the floor and taken their hands, looking at him with a pained smile. Lucio had not known who these two old strangers were, or why they looked at him with such familiarity and pain, until Pansy had told him who they were.

It had cheered him a little, and they were very kind and asked him a great deal of questions, but no matter how much they smiled or stroked his hair they were all still very painfully waiting for mother to join them. And every hour that passed without that happening was a grim reminder that he might have been the only lucky one that night. They were all so lost in their troubled thoughts that nobody noticed when Pansy's mark, the Malfoy crest, which was covered underneath a heavy jumper, faded slowly from her arm.

Lucio sighed shakily, rubbing at his eyes.

Suppose he could find a way to return home and help her? Pansy wouldn't hear of it, but there was a fireplace, and the fire was low but still going, and there on the hearth was a little pot of floo powder. He had never Floo'd on his own before, but father had once explained the mechanics to him and Lucio was sure he could manage it. Would it even work if he hadn't been able to use magic yet?

Lucio stared at the fireplace, conflicted. Mother had also warned him of the dangers of Floo, what might befall a person who didn't do it correctly.

But it was worth trying if it meant he could save his mother.

He had to be quiet, to not wake the others.

His legs dangled off the couch—Lucio maneuvered himself off the couch carefully as a mouse, trying his best not to make a sound. Pansy twitched in her sleep but didn't wake.

Lucio turned to the fireplace and took a step, and in that second three things happened simultaneously:

A large portal opened up in the middle of the room,

the little pot that contained the Floo powder shattered without anyone touching it, spraying its contents everywhere in a grey plume,

and everyone else in the room jolted awake as Hermione was deposited into the room, and the portal shut behind her.

There was a beat as everyone recollected themselves.

Pansy rose from the couch, blinking hard like she thought she was still in a dream.

Lucio stared at his mother, his face crumpling. She was looking right at him, her expression mirroring his.

And Mr. and Mrs. Granger let out a wordless cry of alarm and recognition.

Everyone rushed forward.

Hermione and Lucio met first—they wrapped their arms around each other. Then came Pansy, and then Mr. and Mrs. Granger, and they all sank down to the floor, too spent and emotional to speak, but their sobs all translated to

You're home.

END PART TWO

34. The New Underworld (Epilogue)

A/N: Do me a favor and listen to these two tracks:

1: Invitation to the Voyage-Julia Kent (instrumental-can listen to it during/after reading)

2: The Horror of our Love-Ludo (with words-best to listen after)

This is the last one, folks. Please stick around after the chapter for a condensed (corny) thank you letter or just read the full thing here: [thewandererswanderingdaughterblog.wordpress.com / 2023 /07 /31 /a-letter-to-you/](http://thewandererswanderingdaughterblog.wordpress.com/2023/07/31/a-letter-to-you/)

He shouldn't be feeling so much pain. He possessed the strength and power mortals could only dream of, he had made men cower and soil themselves at his feet, he had felled hundreds of bodies within his short life so far. He had fashioned himself an empire, demolished a prison, bested all his enemies, crowned his own queen.

All that... for nothing.

Emptiness and silence reigned here.

His home lay in ruin around him. All his loyal were dead and rotting, filling the room with their nauseating stench. Bodies bloating beyond recognition—it was offensive to his eyes and nose but he couldn't be bothered to move them out.

His tears had long-since dried but his heart, that funny thing, continued to ache like it might burst.

It annoyed him.

He shouldn't be feeling anything at *all*.

But the pain would not leave and *damn this restraint*, it would not leave him, either. From the moment Hermione had abandoned him he had raged against the Vow, raged against the magic that held him. It never wavered, not even once. The barrier inside of him that blocked his magic from his access was impenetrable. Draco used every last reserve of his strength, every minute bit of his focus to blast it apart, to undo the curse, but it never faltered for even a second, and he was still stuck here with his magic *severely* limited.

How had it all gone so wrong?

He'd begged to the empty room over and over until his voice ran out, still unable to grasp that she was gone, and when she'd forbidden him from speaking to her through their mental link, who else was there to plead to but the air?

It was an agony to get up, to face the destruction alone. Draco still could not reckon with his wife's duplicity, how she'd schemed behind his back and yet sat in his lap and played the

perfect wife.

She would come back. She had to. Perhaps all she needed was a few weeks to cool off and see that they were better off together, that she had lost her temper in quite an egregious manner, and would beg for his forgiveness. He would forgive her in a heartbeat, would smother her with kisses—there would be no room for anger or reproach, for only their future mattered.

He didn't eat and didn't sleep—didn't need to, at this point—all human pretenses were behind him. Perfect timing, too—all the food in the manor was currently rotting, and there was no way to fetch more... nor did there appear to be anything edible in this strange underground place.

The only thing he cared about was to try to get free, but every time he started his struggles afresh he would be burned anew by the Vow's hold—its own energy seemed limitless and shockingly, greater than his own to curb him this successfully. He was not affixed to a wall or anything in particular, and he realized she had left him with full access to the manor, or what was left of it. The days and nights passed in the same indiscriminate darkness of this new home. A year might have flown by since she had left and he would've had no clue. The clocks in the manor were no help, either. They were all destroyed beyond repair or frozen.

He didn't understand any of it—but he could try, and he dragged himself up and onto his feet and hobbled around the wrecked glory of his home, fueled by some last fumes of hope that he might still find her, or anybody else who might have survived the Event.

There was nobody. He went into each and every room, marveling at how intact the place still was, considering how it had sunk underground in such strange, violent fashion. The walls were cracked and there were holes in ceilings and floors. Every last window was obliterated, yes, but the damage could have been worse. *Should* have been worse, yet here it all stood still.

She was not there and just as she'd mentioned before, neither was Lucio.

His family was gone. They had conspired against him, abandoned him when they should have praised him and basked in the expectation of its soon to be newest member.

Yet it had all been a lie. The ache in his heart threatened to eat him from the inside out no matter how hard he tried to ignore it.

She had left him with the ability to repair the manor if he so wished—but what was the point?

Instead he went to their bedroom and crawled into their bed—her scent still lingered there, and he lay in it and wept.

Eventually he felt the need to understand *where* exactly he was now trapped. He exited the manor, feeling more vulnerable than he'd ever felt without the security of his own magic.

It was dark out there, too. The ground was rocky and largely barren; there were distant fields of tall, dying grass all around. There was no main light source—he cast a *lumos* and saw the place went on for miles and miles, and he could see that somehow he'd come to a cavernous area, that no natural light existed here, and the ceilings were so high off he couldn't fathom this place's scale. The little light that *did* infiltrate that darkness, he couldn't tell its

origin. It simply existed there on its own energy, and somehow it was enough to illuminate the place just enough to make out his surroundings.

It didn't make sense.

It was not cold nor hot but somewhere in-between, and a black, misty river wound a wide path through the area. Stalactites and stalagmites littered the ground and ceiling, and when he tried to speak, he heard his voice bouncing around the place.

For a while, all this made him believe that somehow Hermione actually *had* killed him, for the place had a strange and unearthly quality to it. It felt quite like what limbo must be like, he decided. He was not afraid of the unknowns here, only the unknown of how and why he was trapped here specifically.

Draco spent his time in the bedroom or in the banquet hall, watching the bodies continue to decay. When he could take no more of their offensive collective smell, he begrudgingly began to clean up, hauling them outside in pairs to bury in the cool, wet soil. As he worked, that strange light stayed high in the ceiling like an alternate sun that lacked the warmth of its sister.

Digging the graves was a good distraction. The physical labor was welcome and helped soothe his loneliness for as long as it lasted. He might have waved his hand and had them all buried at once, but Hermione had seen to it that he must dig them all. Very well—they had served him loyally and so he would grant them the honor of an intimate burial.

My murderess wife, he thought, again and again. She would sooner slaughter those who adore her than accept their love.

Yet he still couldn't find it in himself to be truly angry at her.

He finished faster than he meant to, having forgotten his own strength. There was now a little burial ground to the left side of the manor, each grave marked with a headstone bearing the name of its occupant.

My court, he thought, looking around at his work. Loyal to the last. Even their skeletons will remain here with me.

The only thing he could do was wait. Try to ignore the pain and longing for his wife. He would sit in his study, destroyed by his own doing, staring out the window into the bleak darkness.

The cabinet that had once proudly displayed his trophies lay on its side, wrenched off its feet by his furious hands. All the treasures inside were scattered within into jumbled heaps. His desk bore countless claw marks, some digging so deep into the wood that he'd torn out sharp slivers of it. Any hangings on the walls had been upended and lay scattered on the ground.

The window behind his desk was blown out—he would stand there for long periods of time staring out into the murky land surrounding him, waiting. There was nothing else to do, and so he found himself slipping into catatonic states frequently.

The stained-glass windows in the library and the bedroom were the only things he'd bothered to replace so far.

When he could bear the heartache, he would look at her portrait. He'd managed to drag it from the spare room into the bedroom, and put it against a wall. The portrait of Lucio now hung in the dining hall along with his own, but Hermione's, he couldn't stand to be away from for too long so he put it where he spent most of his time.

Time crawled and crawled. There was no night and there was no day, just that enduring, indiscriminate darkness outside.

At first, he would just sit and stare at the painting, mourning the fact that he'd never had the chance to have it animated. Though Martin had survived, Draco could not go to him and drag him back here to do it. He fantasized about that a lot. The painter would finish the spell only to be killed in the most brutal ways, all dreamed up in detail.

Now and then he thought he might need *some* sleep after all. He was noticing details in the painting that seemed slightly askew—Hermione's hair, draped over her shoulder, was somehow moved an inch to the left, obscuring more of her breasts than before. Or a particular fold or wrinkle in her skirt was not in the right place. Sometimes he thought he saw her eyes blink, or flicker the smallest degree.

He was probably going mad just from missing her. Or he needed sleep. Draco waved it off.

Then, one day (or night) as he sat there, watching her, she *moved*.

Draco slid off his armchair and to the ground on his knees in shock.

Hermione sat upright and then stood from the chaise, a dark smile on her lips as she walked closer to the frame of the painting, growing larger with every step until she was standing right there as though it were a window and not a painting, and her scale matched his.

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He went to her, grasping the frame as best as he could with his bound hands, his eyes huge. She was *there* in that green gown, looking every bit as beautiful and venomous as she had been right up until the moment she'd left.

"What is this?" he asked, barely recognizing his own voice. His heart pounded at the surprise.

"Goodness, you're filthy," she said, and though her words demeaned he nearly collapsed at the sheer relief and joy of hearing her voice again.

"Are you really so lost without me?" she mocked, tilting her head in coy fashion.

"Sweetling," he rasped. "Tell me you're coming back. Did you animate this in secret?"

"She had Martin do it in secret," Hermione replied. "And she instructed me not to reveal myself to you until after she escaped."

"Of course," Draco said. He would have kissed the canvas if it held even a fraction of his wife's warmth. He could not take his eyes from her. "She was so clever to trick me the way she did. Do you know where she is?"

The painting narrowed her eyes at him.

"Why would she tell me that?" she asked. "I have no business knowing, not when I'm stuck here to watch over *you*."

Watch over me...

She cared. She must, else she wouldn't have bothered to go to that length, or to leave him with the barest shreds of magic still available to him.

His heart swelled with love for his wife.

She still loves me.

"Let me hold you," he said to her, already moving forward, crouching to enter the painting. "Please. That's all I'll do. Just let me come in. I miss you."

"No."

Draco flinched, and the vow's magic pushed him away from the frame. His heart sank.

"She didn't plant me here to *coddle* you, you fool," she snarled, her teeth sharpening. "I'm here as part of your punishment. She knew how desperate you'd become. I won't allow you in here and you absolutely aren't allowed to pleasure yourself around me, either."

Draco's eyes went wide. So she had done it that far in advance of the Event. Merlin, but that wife of his was clever, indeed.

"Very well. May I simply look at you, then?" he asked hoarsely. "And speak to you?"

She gave him a cold look and then nodded. Draco sighed in relief, and she stepped away from the frame to retreat further into the scene, to finally sit back onto the chaise.

"She really planned all this behind my back," Draco murmured.

She smiled.

“Yes, we’re quite clever. It’s a wonder you never suspected a thing.”

“I did,” he admitted. ‘Deep down—I felt I had to prepare myself. I needed a way to gain the upper hand in case she rebelled again. I thought it was enough.’ He made himself look away from her red eyes. “Fool, indeed.”

“You look proud rather than angry.”

“I am,” he said, looking back up. ‘I am. And I’ll never stop loving her, even if she never returns.’ He looked at her with a glint of hope in his eyes. “What did she tell you?”

She deliberated for a moment, deciding whether or not to tell him.

“She was asking herself if she believed you when you told her you wanted to do better,” she said simply. “She wanted to believe you. But the past still matters to her. She wants you to learn from it. She’s full of so much pain.”

“I told her to forget all that,” Draco said, frowning. “That we’d start over if we could only meet in the middle. I *thought* that was what we were doing.”

“If you hadn’t dismissed her pain for so long, she might have accepted that.”

“What use is there dwelling in it?” he asked sharply, and she laughed.

“Are you asking yourself that?” she taunted. “Every time you come to me I see the misery in your eyes. Yet you continue to torture yourself, moping around and watching me.”

Chagrined, Draco clenched his fists.

“She doesn’t love you.”

Draco’s heart felt like a giant had crushed it in one pinch, a soft implosion in his chest.

“Will she ever?” he asked, not caring how pathetic he sounded. “Truly?”

She gave him a contemptuous look.

“That depends on whether you learn your lesson or not.”

Draco wanted to ask her more questions, but she was settling back into the position she’d been painted in. He watched, dismayed, as she froze in place, and the portrait was still once more.

[At the same time-1 week after the event]

Despite the horror she had wrought, the bodies she had left behind, Hermione had not felt such thorough peace in years. Lucio refused to let go of her for three days straight after the event, and he slept so fitfully at night that he only quieted down *when* she was there beside him. She took the wedding ring off her finger (marveling at how *easily* it came off) and kept it hidden in a drawer in her dresser.

Hermione knew nothing she could ever do could relay the extent of her gratitude to Pansy. She hugged her so tightly that Pansy had bruises on her back afterward, and held her face and kissed her on the cheeks over and over until they both began to laugh, building into hysterics

that refused to go away for several minutes. Their plan had worked against all odds, and Hermione knew without a doubt that regardless of her own great power, she wouldn't have been able to pull it all off without Pansy's help.

The Obliviate had finally worn off of Hermione's parents, aided by Pansy's attempts to break the remnants of the curse in the days while she had waited for Hermione to enact their plan.

They were relieved, so relieved, their tears outnumbering their daughters'. They did not let her go for hours, stroking her face, blinking in bewilderment at the large gaps in their memory.

"Where have you been, darling?" they kept asking her. "What happened?"

She told them, patiently explaining everything over the course of the afternoon. About school. About the war. About the sacrifice she'd made with the Obliviate on their minds to protect them. About the Head Boy who had been her enemy and kidnapped her, made himself her husband and later, the father of their son, and then fashioned himself into a Lord. About the times she had broken free but been brought back under threat. Everything up to a point—she never mentioned the Horcruxes, or what she had done and participated in Draco's court. It was only more pain to add to their burdens, and she wouldn't do that to them. What mattered was that they were together again—it broke her heart to see their aged faces, knowing they didn't have long left. Though they'd had to upend their lives and abandon their home to come to the safehouse to live with them they never regretted it or blamed their daughter for it. All that mattered to them was the reunion.

The first few days were the hardest, as is with everything. Lucio was anxious and frightened, asked about his father, what had happened to him, for everyone had noticed the blood that had coated Hermione's skin and clothes when she had finally appeared. Hermione told him the truth—they were free. Now they could live their lives as they wished and not according to Draco's plan.

Draco was a bad man. A monster of all kinds. But he had been the only father Lucio had ever known. Lucio cried a little when he realized they would not be going back home. Though he was happy to be with his mother, inside he still held conflicting emotions in regard to his father.

These periods of sadness were interspersed with joy to have his grandparents around and he immediately took a liking to them, peppering them with question after question about them, about his mother, about the muggle world. They doted on him to no end, answering every question patiently, taking him for a tour of the house, showing him their old photo albums they had packed with them and even regaling him with stories of Hermione's youth.

Pansy and Hermione worked quickly to check on the wards around the house and add new ones, for Hermione didn't know what to expect—would the Vow's chains hold until she decided it was time? Or would Draco turn up here as soon as he could?

She was determined to be prepared in any case.

He could not so much as appear on the street without their knowing. He might still show up and be able to brute force his way in, but by then they would've had enough warning to flee, or prepare to defend themselves.

The mental connection remained intact. Hermione didn't know how to shut it off without needing to destroy the Horcruxes. For the first few days it was completely silent and she kept wondering if it meant Draco *had* died somehow, if he had been crushed deep underground, but it was mere wishful thinking.

His voice eventually came on the third day, weak and pleading.

Hermione.

She flinched, her eyes closing.

I love you more than anything. I need you, and I need my son.

Hermione pictured him as she'd left him, humiliated and utterly defeated. She wondered if he had recovered at all yet, or if he was still a mess on the floor of the banquet room. A heady rush of victory and satisfaction filled her.

Hermione, please.

Come back to me. Come home.

She supposed she hadn't explicitly forbidden him from communicating with her, or else the Vow wouldn't have allowed it.

She said nothing.

I know you're there, he said, and the pain in his voice was exquisite. Bring our son home. I acted foolishly, I accept that. You may torture me as much as you please and I'll thank you for it each time—just don't leave me here without you.

You know I'm not sorry for any of it, he said. But I meant it when I said I was willing to do things better this time around. We were so beautiful together. We could have that again if you come home. I'll be the husband you deserve and you can keep me in these chains if you wish.

Hermione had heard enough.

*I don't want to hear your voice, she sent back, sharp as a dagger. Though it's sweet to hear you beg. I'm done with you for now. Now be **silent**.*

And from that point on, a blissful silence reigned.

Lucio exhibited his first signs of magical ability in that first week, just before he turned six. His grandmother had misplaced her glasses in the kitchen somewhere and was tearing the room apart looking for them, distracted until they'd floated up to her from where Lucio had last seen them (on the counter, accidentally hidden beside the toaster). She had immediately known what happened and summoned the others to share the news. Ecstatic, Lucio asked his mother when they could go to buy his wand and sign him up for school.

Hermione had taken a page from Draco's book and added an enchantment around the safe house to disguise them every time they went out. She, Pansy, and Lucio set off for Diagon Alley feeling rather confident they wouldn't be recognized, but still cautious, not quite knowing what to expect.

She was shocked to find that there were posters of her and Draco lining the walls of many shops, and there were lists and flyers with photos of many other missing people. The posters offered a handsome reward to anyone who had any information on what had happened to them all.

Hermione didn't even bother looking at the posters with Draco's or her own faces—the others, however, she couldn't look away from.

There was Nott's face, and there was Astoria Greengrass, and there was the Erik's. So many others she recognized but had no name for.

She rushed the rest of the outing. Hermione bought a load of starter books for Lucio and they got him his wand (unicorn hair and ash wood).

Nobody took notice of them or asked questions. They had not been followed, either, as far as Hermione and Pansy could discern. But there *had* been talk about what happened to the Dark Lord, springing up everywhere though it was a week after the ordeal. There were newsstands on every other corner with an old photo of Draco and herself on the front page, the words above them reading:

THE LOST EMPIRE: LORD AND LADY MALFOY MISSING AMONG 270 OTHERS

The mystery of the century: where have they all gone? A week later, still no answers. Foul play suspected.

Hermione steered clear of those. Lucio was too busy staring down at his wand in his hands, admiring and playing with it to notice the newspapers. Pansy looked at Hermione, worry pinching her expression.

"Word is the entire place just *disappeared*," said a man to their left loudly. "Apparently, it had heavy wards around it, but even those spells are gone, and there's nothing there at all. How in Merlin's name does that happen? No sign of an explosion, no bodies, nothing!"

Hermione cast a simple charm to muddle Lucio's hearing. He didn't even notice.

"Do you think an enemy came in and took them all?" a heavyset woman in a witch's hat asked.

"Good riddance," someone had said loudly. "Malfoy thought himself king, did he? Had more of an ego on him than Voldemort. And now he's gone—serves him right!"

"But where did all of them go?"

"It sounds rather like one of those Muggle cults... do you think they all killed themselves?"

Hermione wanted to hear no more. They went home immediately after that.

Because Hogwarts was gone and Draco's replacement school largely unfinished, she heard that the Ministry (now free of Draco's plants) was planning to seize the place and finish it themselves, as Draco himself couldn't be found anywhere and the wizarding community had really suffered *long enough* without a school of their own. Home-schooling rates had skyrocketed since Hogwarts' demise, as not every family wanted their children to go to the

farther-off options. There were plans to open this new school as quickly as possible—the hiring process was well underway. All hoped that the following September, the place would be up and running.

So Hermione took it on herself to prepare Lucio as best as she could on her own with help from Pansy. For his own sake, she also enrolled him in the nearby elementary school (after securing false identities for each of them along with false documents) so that he could socialize with children his own age and also learn classic Muggle subjects as she'd done as a girl. He thrived there, making friends easily and absorbing knowledge like a sponge. It didn't bother him that he had to hide his powers and heritage there one bit. He was simply glad to live a normal life and be free from the nursery.

[AS TIME PASSED]

Everything she did, everywhere she went, she expected to see him.

She might be free but he had long-since imprinted himself in her psyche. Wherever she went, whether she was alone or not, he always haunted the edges of her vision, lurking in doorways, in the thickest crowds, always watching and waiting. In dreams she fancied she felt his touch, his mouth crawling all over her—sometimes passionate and gentle, other times ravenous and painful. It was on a frequent basis that she would wake with a start, her body heated and pulsing and wet from the memory of his touch. It was undeniable that she craved him still—she had to finish herself off most of the time, but when she was feeling especially bitter towards him she rolled onto her side, clamping her thighs shut, and ignored the desire as best as she could until it went away.

She kept the mental channel between them closed firmly on her end. Only because it was fair, she sent him the news when Lucio first used magic, and then slammed that invisible door shut, not caring for his response. Their son grew, as she had feared, to be the exact image of his father—but to her relief he remained kind, and empathetic and all things good. At school he stood up for others and had a group of friends who adored him and saw him as their leader. All of Hermione's fears for his future thawed knowing this.

With Lucio away at school for long intervals, she found herself bored no matter how hard she tried to occupy herself. She had no interest in completing her schooling (Pansy had taught her the major things she needed to know, among them Apparition at *last* though she didn't really need it at that point) but voraciously read books on every subject, making up for lost time. She nor Lucio needed money, but she took up odd jobs when she felt like it—a few years at a Muggle library, then at a wizarding one to see the difference. Sometimes as a tutor. She remembered her old habits of knitting and gardening and took them up again with her parents, and she showered them with affection at every opportunity to make up for lost time.

Hermione didn't socialize much outside of events she had to go to for Lucio or Pansy's sake. She struck up conversations sometimes but did not keep them going for long and rarely pursued friendships, always fearing disaster. Whenever anybody showed signs of romantic interest, she shut it down quickly.

In fact, for the first couple of years following the separation, Hermione abstained from taking on any sexual partners. There was simply no time and no interest on her part when

there was so much else to do and worry about. It was difficult not to think of Draco when those desires arose—not entirely of her own will but moreso out of habit—she’d been seventeen when the nightmare had begun, and she was in her thirties now. Draco had been a constant in her life that entire time—it was not easy to scrub him from the association with sex. Little by little, however, as her life slowly stabilized and the fear of Draco turning up quieted, Hermione began to step into those waters again. When a man caught her interest she would inquire his status, and if they were game she would take them home with her. She had no intent for a relationship or anything serious, and so it made it easier for her to be direct.

She was bold and went after what she wanted. Tried to take it slow. But there was always an creature inside her that wanted more. She wanted no gentleness. She wanted *no* affection. She would communicate this to her partners—some would struggle to please her and others took up her requests with delight. Still, to her dissatisfaction, Hermione felt something was missing. These strangers were no match for Draco, and it pained her to admit that. Hermione would find herself masturbating to the memory of his lovemaking, his consuming attentions, the way he could fit into her. It was troubling that she had yet to find another lover who could make her feel the way Draco did. She continued to dream of him constantly, always feeling him in her sleep as though he were there with her, on top or underneath her, spearing her, murmuring praise and encouragement into her ear. It was distressingly vivid each time. She would wake, wet between her legs, her body unmarked and untouched but with the unfailing sensation that it had been ravaged by his mouth and hands.

As time passed and Lucio achieved more and more and went on to Ilvermony where he’d been accepted, and then subsequently graduated years later at top of his class, Hermione shared that with Draco through their mental connection. It was more than he deserved, and she almost didn’t do it, but relented bitterly and went ahead. That time, she closed the channel a little more slowly—and felt such a wave of longing and emptiness from his wordless response that it almost choked her. And, most distressingly—love?

She did not dwell on it.

You let me rot in your arms for all that time, she thought, her jaw clenched. Now it’s your turn, but I will live my life while you rot on your own.

She tried to picture him as he’d looked when she’d last seen him. His ragged voice. His beseeching grey eyes. The way he’d clung to her.

I hope you’re miserable, she thought, not caring if he heard or not. I hope every second is an agony for you, and I hope each second feels like it lasts a century.

Draco noticed that the mist around the ground was growing thicker, and that there was a bluish-green tint to it, particularly in the burial ground. It held no odor and when he probed at it, it proved to act no differently to regular mist. He sought to keep an eye on it and went about his business—roaming around his empty home and gazing at and speaking with his wife’s portrait, dreaming of the day he might see her again, but in the flesh. Her portrait always stared back with cold eyes, and when she spoke her words were sharp, recalling the many, many ways he had hurt her.

There was no arguing against her. All those years he had known he was hurting her and kept doing it anyway. He had no excuses—even the mad love and obsession that had gripped him didn't count, and he knew better than to try and use that to reason, no matter how true it was. Hermione had told him to think about his crimes, and her painted self was here to enforce that.

Sometimes he caught her playing with herself, and he was helpless to do anything but watch, even while knowing she was doing it to mock him. His body burned and burned for her touch, her warmth. At night, if he could sleep, he always dreamt of her. The bed always seemed cold without her. No matter how many lights and candles and fires he lit within the manor, it always felt so dim when she was not there. He would have given anything to see merely a glimpse of her, to know what she was doing. Yet time continued to pass, and there was no sign or word from her.

One day/night, as he was roaming around the manor again, and was walking past the dining room, he stopped short at seeing something unexpected there by the table where he and his family had used to convene for their meals.

There was a figure there.

His heart leapt, and he entered the room, ready to call out to her—only to find that the figure had no feet, and that it hovered above the floor, and that he could see right through it.

The ghost of Theodore Nott was looking right at him.

Nott seemed equally surprised to see him, and then looked down at his own hands, all bluish-green and made of the same mist that rolled along the ground everywhere.

He looked up at Draco again and seemed to realize that he was dead. There was pain in his eyes, but he bowed.

“My Lord,” he said. “What happened? What day is it? Has Lady Hermione given birth yet?”

His words brought a fresh wave of pain.

After that point, the other ghosts began to appear.

Lucio was accepted into Ilvermony school of Witchcraft and Wizardry once he turned eleven, and while Hermione hadn't wanted him to go so far away from home, she let him attend with her blessing. (They operated under new names and altered appearances for many years, not wanting to be connected to the Malfoy name out of fear of being punished for Draco's doings.) He made friends easily wherever he went and was well-liked and popular, tearing through school and proving he was his mother's son with every excellent mark he got. When he graduated, Hermione couldn't hold back and sobbed when he was given his diploma. She put up many of his graduation photos all over the house afterward.

On particularly beautiful summer day a year later, Pansy met her future partner while out shopping for groceries, and the next year married her. They had a beautiful wedding that Hermione and Lucio attended and frequently invited them over for no reason at all other than to enjoy each other's company. Pansy and Laina's home in London became a safe, loving

space for them all. Pansy found work as a historian and curator of antiques at a museum of history.

She and Laina moved to London and remained there for some time to begin their family. (They had two daughters and one son.) Pansy took up a side hobby of writing and published a great deal of books to huge success.

Hermione wanted to freeze time, if possible, to keep her family from spreading apart, to selfishly hold them to herself forever. Pansy's absence was deeply felt inside of the safe house, but Hermione was truly overjoyed to see Pansy find such happiness. She and Lucio and her parents thought Laina was absolutely lovely and frequently hosted them there, or went to visit them and their eventual children (two daughters and one son). Between the many visits, they kept a constant correspondence via owl.

Mr. and Mrs. Granger passed a few years later, both in their early eighties by then. First it was her mother, and then her father passed eight months later. Hermione made sure it was as comfortable and peaceful as could be for each of them. On both of those occasions her mother or father held hands with their daughter and rather than lament their time lost, recounted all their time together. Seeing their only daughter's face shining with happiness again was all they had wanted, and they were so proud of Lucio and all his accomplishments. They both passed in total peace, the greatest sadness of their lives happily resolved.

Lucio did his best to comfort his mother, bringing her cups of tea and fresh tissues, letting her smother her sobs into his shirt.

They were buried back in Hermione's hometown, where they had lived for so long. Hermione made sure their tombstones were always neat and laden with bouquets, and she visited them every weekend.

The wizarding world recovered quickly without Draco. No information or clues or bodies were ever found that could give a satisfactory answer as to what happened to all the missing, and as the years dragged on the case was (reluctantly) put aside to focus on other matters. Many of the missing posters were covered over with new adverts or taken down entirely. There were books and articles written on the entire ordeal, delving into Draco Malfoy's incredible rise to power and sudden disappearance and possible death. Hermione flipped through some of them and couldn't help but laugh scornfully at the amount of detail they got wrong or left out entirely. There were still many around who looked favorably on him, still unaware of his true nature.

Though Hermione had managed to cull most of his following a few stragglers remained, but none attempted to take his place. She heard whispers now and then that a small remaining faction still worshiped the Dark Lord and Lady, that they had not attended the event for one reason or another and so didn't know what happened but still strongly believed that their Dark Lord and Lady would return. She debated on whether she should kill them too or not, and tried to keep tabs on their doings, but they were elusive, and as far as she knew they were only too content to sit and wait for something to happen. Deciding that they posed no true threat, Hermione dismissed them entirely.

Draco's influence in the ministry and the prophet withered away without bribes or threats to keep it afloat, and for a long period of time there was a strange calm. His school had been completed and was in full operation, but was named after the wealthy wizard who had stepped in and provided funding for its completion—though a bronze plaque bearing Draco's and Hermione's names was installed, detailing their generous donations at the start of the project. There was even a bust of Draco's head put up in its gallery—a notion Hermione found ludicrous.

Overall, Hermione didn't trust the current peace—she was too used to Dark Lords and wars and conflict—she found herself wondering if ever would appear another to stir up the community.

[11 years later]

On Lucio's seventeenth birthday, they had a lovely little party in the safe house. Hermione and her mother had baked a cake and Lucio had been allowed to invite many of his friends over. It was a wonderful affair, and Lucio enjoyed himself quite a lot, but throughout the event his mind wandered and he found himself wondering if his father remembered, if he would be proud of him.

After they'd sung to him and the presents had been opened and everyone got their slice of cake, Hermione beckoned to Lucio to meet her upstairs in his bedroom and shut the door behind them.

"You're of age now," she said, looking up at him with smiling eyes as she took his hands in hers. The new, beautiful golden watch she had given him was shining on his wrist.

"I can't believe how quickly time passed. Look at my little boy, all grown up."

Lucio blushed, smiling. His curls were swept away from his handsome face and there was a dimple on the left side of his mouth.

The sounds of music and lots of voices mingling and laughter scattered throughout filled the house. Mr. and Mrs. Granger had retired early that night. Pansy was doling out second helpings of cake.

"Thank you for the party, mum," he said. "I love it."

She smiled—despite the eleven years that had passed since they'd come to live here she showed hardly any signs of aging—her hair was still a deep, dark brown and her skin was still youthful and glowing with health, and the lines under her eyes were still faint unless one was very close. She was a very beautiful woman, and more than one of his friends had made comments about finding her attractive, which Lucio found very awkward and always changed the subject quickly.

All the gaps in his knowledge about his father's true character and history had been filled by now, either by Pansy of his mother, or both. They had gently told him of all his father's crimes (sparing a great amount of detail wherever they could) and Lucio had been absolutely horrified to learn he came from such a man, that he had loved him as a boy (and still feared him, too,) but never knew the full extent of his wickedness. He had learned how young his

mother had been when his father had kidnapped and forcefully married her, just how truly awful her captivity had been. It *hurt* to think about, and more than once he found himself retroactively wishing that he had accessed his magic sooner so he could have protected her. He'd shared this to Pansy once, overcome with guilt, and she had kindly told him that even if that had happened his magic would have been no match for his father's, and it only would have put him at risk of punishment.

"It's an honorable thing to wish for," she'd said. "I'm sure she knows you would have protected her if you could have. But you were a child, Lucio. She wanted to protect you from that pain until you were old enough to hear it."

A braver, stronger woman Lucio certainly had never met. As he grew older he would remember that she had a Horcrux, and that she would not grow old. He would never see her as an old woman, and it saddened him, the slow realization that she would likely watch them all die around her.

If ever somebody deserved an extended life to use to heal themselves and enjoy it to the fullest, it was her. But he hated that it had come at such a cost, that despite their free and happy lives now, sadness would still meet them at the end of the road.

"I know you still wonder about your father, sometimes," she said. "I know that our separation wasn't easy on you but I hope you know why I had to do it."

Lucio, now taller than his father and resembling him in almost every way, looked down at his mother and nodded.

"I don't blame you for anything, mum," he said honestly. "You know that. You've given me everything I could ever want or need and I'm grateful."

She squeezed his hand and hesitated.

"...If you want to go and visit him I won't stop you, and I won't be upset. It's your choice."

Lucio stood there for a moment, deliberating.

How many times had he dreamed of the manor since his exit? Sometimes in his dreams it was just as he remembered it, all stately and grand and cold. Other times it was a total ruin, the walls felled and windows all jagged holes, and the tiled floors overgrown with moss and cracked everywhere. Both visions frightened him.

Could he go back and face his father? Could he look him in the eye without flinching or boiling with anger? From what mother had told him, the magic that bound him all these years and kept him from coming after them was really powerful. The little research he'd done on Unbreakable Vows at school comforted him, for though there was no specific answer as to where exactly it had originated or where its power came from, it was mutually agreed in all his textbooks that there was no getting around its punishment, that it was as reliable as the sun rising every morning.

He had been a good father when he was not cruel, and those frightening instances were not that many that Lucio remembered. It made sense that he had kept the worst and most abhorrent of his behaviors mostly secret from him though Lucio remembered more than one

occasion where he had been slightly unnerved by the way father spoke about mother, like she was a possession rather than a human being.

He wished that father had never kept his monstrous personality hidden from him. It would be easier to hate him if he had beat him from the start, if he had screamed at or mocked him, treated him as badly as the others. But instead Lucio still vividly remembered the day father had taught him to fly and declared him a natural, he remembered the good dinners where he, mother and father had a great time all talking to each other and sharing stories, he remembered how loved and safe he felt whenever father invited him into his study and spoke to him about the importance of family, and imparted his wisdom on his young mind.

They were both victims of Lord Malfoy—but Lucio knew his mother had suffered the most out of anyone.

It's mother's choice to forgive him, he'd thought. Because I never will. And I don't think I could trust myself not to curse him if I ever saw him again for what he did.

"I can't," he finally said, his voice deep. "He's a monster. I'd rather have grown up without a father than know we're related."

Hermione sighed, both out of relief and sadness.

"I hate that I look like him," Lucio mumbled, looking away. "It must be painful to look at me."

"No, no, no," Hermione said, frowning. "Never. You may look like him, but darling, every time I look at you I feel *love* and *pride*."

She pressed her palm against his cheek tenderly.

"Everything we went through that day, even though it was painful, was worth it to me. Not only because I got my freedom but also because I got to see you grow up into a good man. You have none of him inside you, and every day I'm grateful for that, because *you* are what kept me going and fighting when everything seemed hopeless."

Lucio nodded, blinking away tears, leaning into his mother's touch.

"That was all I wanted," she said. "For you to grow into yourself and not be molded by whatever your father's goals for you were. That was what his father did to him. He was raised among terrible people who did terrible things and all that bled into him. I refused to let him pass that along to you."

She let him go and procured a large pouch from thin air. She held it out to him.

"He still loves you," she said. "I haven't spoken to him since that day but I know it's true. I know he wouldn't want you to be without, and I agree. Before I escaped I squirrelled away as many valuable things as I could to make sure we would be able to land on both feet, and that you, Pansy, and your grandparents would be taken care of. I also set aside an inheritance for you."

Lucio was frowning, looking down at the pouch.

Though they had not lived anywhere near the poverty line all these years, the safe house certainly could not compare to the grandeur of the manor. It had rarely occurred to him to

wonder how they had managed it when only Pansy worked.

Her lip wobbled a bit and suddenly she looked on the verge of tears. She pushed it into his hands.

“You can access it whenever,” she said. “The key is inside. Should you want to move out and begin life on your own, or just have a place to yourself, this is to help you.”

“Mother,” Lucio said, taken aback. The pouch was quite heavy in his palm. He could feel and hear coins clinking inside as the weight shifted around.

A tear trickled down her face now.

“I’m so proud of you, darling,” she said, and even her voice was shaking with emotion. “You’ll always be my baby. But I can’t keep you with me forever, no matter how much I’d like to. I just want you to know that no matter what, I’ll always love you and be here for you.”

Lucio hugged his mother, wrapping his arms around her tight. She buried her face into his shoulder and sniffled.

“I’m sorry,” she said, laughing a little. “I tried to hold it back.”

“Thanks, mum,” Lucio said, his voice a little muffled. “You’re amazing.”

At 19, Lucio finally moved out. He had wanted to move out earlier but stayed, worrying that his mother would struggle being on her own after his grandparents died. She knew this and appreciated it for a time, but told him it was alright that he wanted to go live on his own, and that she would be fine. Lucio moved out with her enthusiastic blessing and found himself a place nearby Diagon Alley, and they communicated many times a week and even went out to lunch every other weekend.

Lucio continued to develop his academic career by furthering his studies in the muggle world. He collected many degrees and taught dually in the Muggle and the Wizarding world (History and Charms in each respective realm). When he turned 27, he met another young man named Isaac Bitterwood at a bookstore. They dated for two years before marrying, to Hermione’s absolute delight.

The safehouse was quiet and emptier than it’d been at the start, but Hermione still felt content. She visited Pansy or Lucio whenever she felt really lonely, and her hobbies and odd jobs helped distract her too.

Often, she couldn’t help but think of Draco’s reaction if he was there and saw her in this new life.

The things he might say were too easy to predict:

You keep no servants? Remember you’re still a lady, Hermione. Someone should be waiting on you.

All these menial household tasks are beneath you. Don’t do this to yourself.

You ought to be dressed in silks and dripping in gold and diamonds, sweetling. Those rags conceal your figure too much.

Do these strangers satisfy you at all? None of them come close to my size. I'll stretch your darling cunt and fuck you as hard or softly as you want.

I know you miss me, Hermione. Why do you bother staying away, when you have me waiting here on my knees for you?

It almost made her smile.

I fought for this freedom, and it's my right to use it however I please.

This house might not meet his standards, but it was secure and cozy. Her clothes might not flatter her body, but they were warm and comfortable and *she* had picked them for herself. She had no servants and preferred it that way. It was the life Draco never would have given her. It was not as luxurious and comfortable but it was imperfect and full of love and happiness and *hers*, just the way she wanted it.

But she still dreamed of the dark. Of a cavern where a strange mist rolled along the ground. Of a broken man, chained by a powerful, mysterious light.

That dark called to her. It stroked the terror inside her, the vast power that had lain dormant and suppressed deep inside. She had never lost that jagged edge, nor had it dulled during that span of time. It was always there, just under the surface, waiting to strike again. She feared it, terrified that one day it might burst from under her skin and ruin her new life. That just as it had done with Martin, it would scare away her family. So she concentrated and exerted lots of energy constantly to keep it trained inside her, to not let her wrath peek out from underneath. It was quite a difficult task, and she didn't always succeed.

Once, a man had followed her around a bookstore, watching her in what he thought was a discreet fashion. She had passed by him first, catching his attention, and he had waited until she'd been distracted, bent over slightly to pull a book from a shelf before he moved quickly by, grazing her ass with his palm.

Hermione paid for her things quickly and left, lured him into an alleyway next door, where he thought he'd had her cornered. She watched his neck snap of its own accord and left him there, pain and shock still etched on his face.

Another time, she'd seen a group of three men following a young woman on a dark night in the city as Hermione had been wandering, trying to convince herself she *wasn't* looking for trouble. For an outlet. There was music blaring from a corner shop and lights flashed in the clothing shops across the street. Hermione had been in bed an hour before, and then got up, dressed, and left the house abruptly, restless almost to the point of fury.

She'd wandered the streets for only a few minutes, watching cars drift slowly or speed by, trying to convince herself to go home, when she heard the group coming her way, the frightened click-clack of high-heeled shoes on pavement. Crude comments by three very inebriated men.

She found the source at once, almost *flying* to them but she settled across the street—the young woman had been out dancing and had a flimsy jacket on and her arms wrapped around herself. She locked eyes with Hermione and Hermione recognized that raw fear.

At that moment, because the young woman had slowed down in relief at seeing someone who might help, one of the men reached forward to grab or grope her.

Hermione struck from where she stood, and his severed hand fell to the ground. He screamed in shock, and the girl whipped around, her long hair swinging in the air.

The other two were dead on the floor by then, having been killed at the same time. The one who'd reached for her was gurgling on the ground, his throat torn open. He made eye contact with her and reached up as if begging for help. The music coming from the corner shop drowned everything out. Its windows were plastered with sale signs so no one could look in or out.

The young woman staggered away and tried to run.

She left the bodies there to be discovered. Hermione had left no trace. She never did. Not even the CCTV could pick her up when magic shielded her. She caught up with the young woman, calmed her down after introducing herself and modified her memory so that to *her*, the three men had simply crossed the street and gone into the shop for a Cornetto.

The young woman's name was Macie, and Hermione made sure she got home safe.

It was things like this that triggered that wrath, and she found she couldn't help herself. Sometimes the length of time between these incidents was months or years—sometimes it got as bad as multiple times a week.

Hermione didn't age as the years passed. At first it didn't bother her much, but as everyone around her began to show signs of their age, she felt the need to keep up the appearance of being an aging, regular human. She took it on herself to charm her own appearance, adding lines and wrinkles to her face and body and gradually made her hair lighter until it was grey. It wasn't really necessary, considering she didn't go out that much by then and because when she *did*, it was in disguise anyway. But Hermione found it almost fun to experiment what she might look like as an older woman, and used the memory of her mother and father's older faces as reference. She would look at her altered appearance in mirrors, fascinated by a natural process so commonplace, but that would never affect her, for the Horcrux had frozen her forever at twenty-six.

The warped voice that had comforted her for so long back in the manor had grown largely dormant since she'd escaped it, only making appearances when her wrath was too strong to subdue. She felt that power inside her languishing, and found herself almost wishing she had occasion to unleash its full potential again—but there were none.

Pansy passed of natural causes at 98. Hermione was there with her family with it happened, and they were able to share their last goodbyes and love for each other, smiling through their tears. She left a lovely family behind who held her a beautiful memorial service.

Hermione and Lucio attended it and paid their respects to their dear friend. Though Laina and their children were more than capable of paying for the funeral costs, Hermione quietly insisted that she be allowed to pay for the entire thing, and knowing their history, they graciously accepted.

Pansy was buried in London, and atop her casket, paired with one of red roses from Laina, was a bouquet of yellow roses put there by Hermione to signify their friendship and deep bond. Hermione set up trusts for her children, as she had wealth to spare and very little to spend it on.

Lucio passed at 113.

Like Pansy, he'd held a long, successful and prestigious career. Hermione was there too with his family, sitting around his bedside. Lucio's family was privy to her actual age, her resistance to aging, but not the cause. Hermione sat at her son's side with one of his hands clasped in hers, tears pouring down her face.

She had long-dreaded that day in the years leading up to it, knowing it was inevitable as she watched him grow older and older. A mad idea crossed her mind once or twice—what if he could join her and Draco in immortality?

She would pose the question to him, and if he said yes, she would go to Draco, and ask him how it was done or figure it out on her own. And she would do whatever it took to keep her only son, her pride and joy, from leaving her. He was such a wonderful person that he deserved to live longer, to accomplish more, to bless so many other lives.

The dark thoughts gripped her for a period of time, and she realized with a shock that she finally understood Draco's obsession with keeping her frozen in time, forever outside of death's shadow.

She had to push the terrible idea out of her head eventually. Lucio would never agree to such a horrible thing, *especially* what it would take to do it. And for that matter, she could never condemn him to her same fate—watching everyone she loved die around her. It was difficult to make peace with the concept, but the day finally came and Lucio left her, and the part of her heart that the Horcrux had been unable to take over all that time finally gave out.

She and Isaac split the cost of the funeral services, and a mausoleum was erected to house Lucio's remains, which he and Isaac had long ago agreed on. She placed an arrangement of irises at its door.

Hermione still mourned. Though she wasn't fully aware of it, Lucio had been the sole reason the Horcrux hadn't completely managed to possess her heart until that point, and now that he was gone it finally succeeded. She had cried at his deathbed yet afterward only felt her sadness distantly. She supposed it wasn't so bad—it was better to acknowledge it from afar rather than face the full brunt of her sorrow and pain, but it still surprised her and came in waves when she least expected it.

Isaac invited her to stay for a while longer with them, after Hermione indicated it was time for her to go. Hermione declined, and said her heartfelt goodbyes to him and her (now adult)

grandchildren and promised she would visit again. They kissed her cheeks and made her promise to come visit or call any of them if she wanted company.

When she got home she made sure all her affairs were in order. There were the inheritances set up for Pansy's children and for Lucio's. Now that they were all adults they had full access to them, and she'd placed a little mountain of gifts and books for each of them inside, tailored to their tastes. The safehouse was fully paid for and well-concealed; it would stand the test of time if she ever had to return to it, and though by now she'd squared away most of the money she had left there was still a small fortune left to take care of herself or someone else should she need to—

But she doubted it.

She had lived the life she wanted and more. The ones she loved had, too. She might stay and brave the rest of time on her own, or at least go for another fifty years, but she was tired of denying the truth to herself.

She was tired of being alone. Tired of ignoring the power and darkness that gnawed at her from inside.

No matter what she did or how different a life she lived up here, there would *always* be that trail of bodies behind her, and her inhuman abilities would keep her from getting too close to anyone else. Draco had told her as much but she'd already known before then it would happen. She was no fool.

Something Draco had told her once kept floating back into her thoughts.

Even monsters feel lonely, too.

There was nothing left for her here. Callous though that sounded to her remaining family and friends, she'd made certain they would be taken care of so it could soften the sting. The notes she left in the safe house would explain everything and tell them not to worry. She would be perfectly safe where she was going.

Three weeks after Lucio's passing, Hermione went out into the garden in the morning. She'd rummaged in her dresser and pulled out an old ring. It still sparkled brilliantly, and she slid it back onto her finger.

It was summer, and it was hot and humid outside. She stood there in the sun, feeling it warm her skin and clothing.

She closed her eyes and opened the channel.

Draco, she sent to him, and instantly felt his end of the connection flare to life.

His response came at once.

Hermione?

Come.

He was there in an instant, appearing so quickly that the air rustled around her.

Draco felt the pull of the channel and Apparated at once, letting it guide him to her, his heart racing.

When he landed, he was blinded by the sun. It had been a century since he'd been exposed to it, after all, and he almost staggered at its strength, the instant heat on his skin. He had grown much too used to the dark below, and it took a moment of him blinking hard and squinting until his vision adjusted. Fully recovered, he straightened and saw an old woman there a few paces before him and stopped in his tracks, recognizing her at once.

She stood there watching him, not saying a word.

Draco felt his heart wrench.

"Hermione," he whispered.

She hadn't expected to feel such emotion at seeing Draco again.

He was exactly as he'd been when she had left him. Beautiful and larger than life—their eyes locked and she felt a thrill race up her spine.

Emotion swirled in his eyes. He looked at her up and down, like he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"Firebird," he whispered. His lips curved protectively around the word. He dared not take a step toward her. The sudden fear of saying the wrong thing gripped him—what if he angered her and she flew away again?

"You're—how?"

"This is what you took from me," she said. "I had to watch everyone I love die. I have to charm myself to look this way, because if I don't I still look 26, and I wanted to know what I would look like if I could age."

Draco approached her slowly, his eyes never leaving her, taking in each wrinkle, her voluminous white hair, her withered hands. She was so changed and had done a marvelous job with the charms—but underneath it all he still recognized his wife and her dark brown eyes and the shape of her lips and face. His heart constricted.

I did take that from you, he acknowledged. It was a struggle to find the right words—there was so much to say.

I would have loved to be an old man with you.

She winced, looking at him like she hadn't expected him to say such a thing. But he meant it. And that was as close as he could come to truly saying he was sorry, and she knew it, too.

"May I—" He swallowed. His mouth was dry. "Can I touch you?"

Her expression wavered, and she gave a slight nod.

Draco closed the space between them carefully, taking her face in his hands. Hermione grasped his wrists, blinking back tears.

"I've missed you every second of every day," he breathed, his voice breaking. "Hermione, light of my life, my brave, scheming Judith... tell me what's wrong. I can feel your heartbreak."

Hermione took in a shaking breath.

"Lucio is gone."

Draco's breath hitched—he looked at her in shock and a tear fell from his eye.

"How long has it been?" he asked.

"One hundred and seven years," Hermione said. "Our son died three weeks ago."

Draco hung his head, one hand covering his face, stunned. His shoulders shook.

"Why didn't you *call* me?" he asked. "I could have said goodbye. I could have saved him."

"He'd never agree to be like us, Draco," Hermione said. "And it was his choice to not contact you again."

Draco held her throat carefully between his hands, his face pressed into her clavicle, tears dripping onto her skin. Hermione shuddered, hating how welcome his touch felt, how much she had missed it. Craved it.

"You have grandchildren," she said. "Lucio made it clear you're not to contact them."

Draco nodded, numb.

"My son," he said, his voice hoarse. "Gone. My *son*. My only heir."

"He was happy," Hermione told him. "And he lived the life that *he* wanted, not one you'd mandated for him."

"And Pansy?" Draco asked, looking up. His pale eyes were wet and pained. "She's gone, too?"

Hermione nodded. Draco closed his eyes and sighed.

"It's just you and me now," Hermione said, reaching up to brush at his temple.

He swallowed again.

"Why did you summon me?" he asked bleakly. "To twist the dagger by telling me about Lucio?"

Hermione made him straighten—he still leaned in close, nuzzling at her cheek with his nose like the force of a magnet connected them.

"I'm not going to ask for your forgiveness, if that's what you want," she told him. "I don't regret what I did."

"I don't expect you to," he said slowly. "I was blinded by my greed. You were right, Hermione—you and Lucio were enough for me. I should have stopped there... it was all my

fault.”

“All these years and you still smell the same,” he sighed. “Is this a dream? You’re so beautiful—I can’t begin to tell you how much I love you. How much I miss you... I should have been better to you from the start. I won’t say I’m sorry because it would be a lie, but I can promise you that I’ll uphold my vows to you. You need never doubt me now, Hermione. I’m a slave to your happiness. I’ll be the proper husband you always deserved. Come rule me. Shape our lives as you see fit. Come back to our realm, where our people have been asking for you. They adore you still. Turn them out of the manor, or keep them—the choice is yours.”

Hermione absorbed all of this with a mask over her expression, wondering if he had gone mad. Her curiosity burned brighter.

“I’m ready to go back,” she finally said.

He went slack with surprise and joy at her words, and then his arms wrapped around her, crushing her to him—Hermione couldn’t help the moan that left her lips, and her hold on her charms were torn loose by the distraction of his touch, and all her glammers peeled away, revealing her true form, as young as she’d been when Draco had made her Horcrux.

Draco was kissing her cheek, trailing his lips up to her mouth and despite the hunger and passion behind his movements there was still that trepidation like he was waiting for her to object, to push him away.

Hermione only pulled him closer by his platinum collar, grasping at his back with her other hand. Their lips met in a frenzy.

His taste, his lips—just as she remembered them. Draco, too, was reveling in this realization.

“I was fine on my own,” she admitted breathlessly, shivering hard as Draco’s familiar hands roamed along her body. “But with Lucio gone, I couldn’t bear it. It hurts so much, Draco.”

“Then let’s go home,” he said, his teeth scraping lightly over her throat. He kissed her eyelids, her nose. “You shouldn’t suffer alone. Persephone, will you come to the Underworld with me?”

Hermione nodded through her tears.

“I will.”

Something curious happened when they arrived underground back to the manor.

The ground, which had been somewhat grassy yet devoid of color or flora, began to sprout wildly and bloom with color when Hermione’s feet touched the ground. Vivid plants and flowers of all types sprung from the craggy earth, some as high as their hips, some with fruit hanging from their branches.

Draco stared at it in astonishment—for all the time he'd been trapped down here, he'd never seen such a thing occur. Hermione was watching it too, frowning. She looked up and around, her face calm and studious.

"I did this," she said softly, almost to herself. "How?"

There in the distance was the manor, standing tall on a slight hill. It looked in remarkable condition compared to when she'd seen it last. The lights were on within, and there was no gate around it this time but there was a sprawling garden off to the side, and a pine forest behind that.

"I don't know," Draco said. He took her hand and kissed it. "But I know better than to question your power."

"How is there light here?"

"I don't know," Draco said simply. "There are many unnatural things about this realm."

She was looking at the river now—not too far away from them—the water looked black but not from sediment or pollution. A weird fog hung over it, and it rolled across the land. The river was wide and long—it seemed to trail off into the forest, where she couldn't make out whether it kept going straight or made a turn somewhere.

She looked into the water and saw her reflection—reached down to touch it—the water was cool and lovely.

"If it pleases you, I'll build a gazebo there," Draco pointed to a small hill on the other side of the river. 'So you can watch the river in comfort. And if it's what you want, I'll quit the manor and live separately or build you your own beautiful home.' He hesitated. "If your anger is yet unsated and if you don't want to be near me I'll accept it. I can bear us living separately here as long as we don't live in two entirely different realms. I just can't be without you, Hermione. I can't do it anymore."

Hermione flicked the water from her hand down toward the ground.

"It isn't anger I feel now," she said, turning her back to him.

Draco waited for her to explain. She was looking at the manor in the distance, as if she couldn't believe it was still standing. He figured it was better not to press the matter yet.

He came up to her.

"Let me carry you in, my love," he said.

She already missed the surface. It was not hot down here, nor cold but a pleasant in-between. But the thought of going back at this moment didn't appeal to her. Lucio had been her sun, and her sun was gone. Now all that remained was the moon.

She nodded, and let Draco lift her into his arms.

The manor was much changed, yet somehow exactly the same. The biggest difference was that it was larger, and all the damage she had caused to it was repaired so the place looked

new again. All the art Draco had installed around it was still there, and so was the main grand staircase and the foyer. Hermione looked around, fighting the déjà vu that plagued her with every room they passed through.

Memories from a century past played out in her mind's eye everywhere she looked. She could see baby Lucio taking his first steps there in the foyer, where she'd been sitting on the carpet with Draco beside her, ignoring him and focusing only on her son, clapping at his success. She could see Draco pressing her against that particular window and ravaging her there. There was the old Apparition point through which Martin entered and left the manor, and which Pansy had used to exit the place for her leave. It threatened to make her head spin.

"Thank you for allowing me to keep some of my power," Draco said to her, his arms holding her protectively against his chest. "After a point I despaired you would never return, but to keep myself from going mad I allowed myself to think 'what if she does?' and I knew I couldn't let you stay among a ruin."

"You did well," Hermione said. "Though the kindness was more than you deserved."

"It was," Draco acknowledged. "Although you mustn't underestimate the effect of your punishment. You broke me, sweetling. I wept and roared and prayed you would return, and as time passed my hope grew slimmer and slimmer. When you gave me news on Lucio, I hoped you would tell me about yourself and how you were, but you never did. It's been an agony, not knowing. I think of you every moment, and if I can manage to sleep I dream of you. I haven't eaten one bite since you left—it all tastes like ash if you aren't there. I smell you still in our bed and wake disappointed you aren't with me. I wasn't sure how much more I could take until you summoned me."

"It was the same for me," Hermione admittedly softly. "I could always feel you there with me, even if you were here. I felt you in my dreams. I could still hear you clear as day in my thoughts though you were silent."

There was the library with its open doors, and she caught a glimpse of the statues as they passed it. He was taking them to the bedroom.

"I thought about making a Horcrux for Lucio," Hermione said, and Draco's hands tightened on her flesh. "I didn't want him to grow older. I was so close to coming back and asking you how to do it so that he didn't have to die."

"I'm glad to hear his life was a happy one," Draco said. His voice was rough with grief. "You must know, Hermione—I *never* meant him ill. He was my son—I never would have hurt him intentionally. I may have been a little too demanding and strict, but it was only because that's the same way I was raised. All I wanted was for him to be the best he could be."

"But you were still arrogant and cold and cruel," Hermione said. "And it always showed through. I didn't want that to transfer to him. You kept saying he was 'too soft' when he was perfect to me."

"One needs a healthy dose of those traits in order to get through life," Draco replied evenly. "You know it too well, my love."

Hermione couldn't argue with that—nor did she want to.

They'd reached the bedroom.

Hermione looked at Draco, a wry twist to her lips.

"Rather presumptuous of you, to think I'd want sex so soon," she said.

Draco stopped outside the door.

"I thought you might want to change," he said. "Now that you're back."

He had the look about him of a dog that just been scolded. Goodness, but he was so tentative now! It was very unlike him. Hermione wanted to laugh. Had she managed to eradicate his arrogance at last? Or was he simply walking on eggshells because he feared she might leave again?

He was waiting for her response.

Hermione considered it for a moment, then sighed.

"Very well."

She found the green dress in her closet, perfectly intact and looking no worse for wear. She stared at it for a moment. To put it on—or anything else within this closet, really, would be equal to plunging her feet further into this realm. She felt the cool silk between her fingers, remembering how powerful it had made her feel. How Draco had worshiped the sight of her in that gown. She had sold the golden circlet and the matching armbands decades ago, not caring to see them anymore.

"I sold the best jewels you gave me," she told him from within the closet, peering outward to see his reaction. "And the molten dress. And the circlet and arm bands. To make sure we would have enough money to keep us afloat after we left."

There was a strain around his eyes like he was trying not to show his anger.

"I-I didn't notice," he said at last. "I respected your things and didn't touch them. If you'd reached out and asked I would have emptied my vaults for you."

That was surprising. Hermione looked at the bed. Her half was clean and made up. Draco's was not.

"I had no way of knowing," she said. "I planned on the expectation that you would fight me to the last and come hunt me down after I got free. Just like every other time."

She took the dress off the hanger.

It had been a literal lifetime since she'd worn it—would it still fit?

She slipped it on, letting her long hair loose to tumble about her shoulders.

"My portrait," she continued.

"Ah. Yes, I discovered your neat trick. She mocks me mercilessly, this twin of yours."

"Excellent," Hermione said. "Yet you couldn't stay away, could you."

He hesitated.

"Of course not," he said. "You know how weak I am for you. If you'd left me all this time in a room full of hot coals with that portrait suspended in the middle I'd have burnt myself down to cinders just to see you one last time."

The gown was a little tight in the midsection and chest, but it only took a simple adjustment with her magic so that it once again felt like a second skin.

When she emerged from the closet, Draco was waiting there by the door and his mouth went slack. Desire burned in his eyes though he fought to push it back.

"You're even more stunning than before," he said. "I don't know how that's possible."

"You spoke of 'our people,'" she said, walking up to him. "They're here? How is that possible?"

"I think it's best if you saw for yourself," he said.

"They're ghosts, then. And angry with me," Hermione replied. "They must be. I murdered them all."

He shook his head.

"They love you still," he said. "They know you killed them but from the moment they arrived they won't stop asking me where you are, or how you are, and why you left them. I hear them murmuring to each other, worried about their Lady. They don't realize how it adds to my pain."

"Good," she snapped. "I hope everything I put you through gave you a sense of what it felt like to be a captive for so long and unable to fight back. Now you know what it's like."

Her control had slipped and her eyes were red—Draco froze.

Hermione closed her eyes and exhaled slowly. The red gradually faded.

"Did you not tell them to stop?" she asked.

"They do, for a while," Draco said cautiously. "Without my full power it isn't as easy to keep them in check. It's you they want, Hermione. You may choose to look over them or turn them out. No matter what you choose, you'll always be my queen."

Hermione was stepping closer, driving him to distraction. He was doing an admirable job of keeping himself in check, of not looking at her body with the hunger she was so familiar with, of keeping his hands at his sides and not reaching for her.

"Even if I don't grant you your full power back?" she asked.

"I have no say in the decision," Draco replied. "The length and terms of my punishment are yours to wield—you made that clear."

"Good," she said. "Because maybe I need you to prove you're worthy of having it back before I even consider it."

Draco sucked in a breath, realizing the sting behind her words.

"I deserve that," he admitted.

She raised a brow as if to say, *you think?*

"Shall we go downstairs?" he asked. His pupils were so dilated, he looked like a shark. A wounded, cautious shark. She knew the want in his eyes was reflected in hers. She wanted to bite his lip, sink her teeth into his throat.

"I'm sure they'll be happy to see y—"

Hermione reached up, took his chin in her hand and kissed him softly. He melted in her hands, shuddering with desire as she licked at his bottom lip. Their bodies were pressed together. She could feel his erection through his trousers.

"They can wait," she murmured with a devious look in her eye. And then she gave him a shove, watching as he fell backward onto the bed.

She had him between her thighs first, his tongue pleasuring her just in the ways she'd missed. Hermione felt on fire with her hands in his hair, grinding into his mouth when she wanted more friction. Draco moved urgently, like every second of every interaction mattered, like he was terrified she would disappear at any second. He kissed her soft stomach and squeezed her thighs, nibbled on her flesh anywhere he could, her moans filling his ears like the sweetest song he'd ever heard.

She was *here*, she was *back*, and he was still stunned by the fact. How long would she stay? He felt she was still making up her mind and knew nothing he could say or do could influence her decision, as it was only hers to make.

His need was as raw and desperate as hers but he tried not to dwell on it, pushed it to the back of his mind, and focused only on her pleasure. If she made up her mind to leave soon after he couldn't stop her, but as her husband he wanted to do his duty and leave her without want. She was wet and fragrant and lush and wild, clawing and biting at him, kissing him with such ardor that he felt he might drown in her attentions. His lust was a heavy haze in his mind—no amount of masturbation or daydreams in the hundred years since she'd left could replicate this feeling of *being* together, of knowing that she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

She let him finger her and he worked her with his tongue and two digits inside her, his eyes blazing with heat and watching her every reaction intently. She screamed as she came, a hot flush on her cheeks and her body shaking under his touch. Draco withdrew his fingers from her and she watched as he licked them clean, moaning.

He thought she was done. That she might only have wanted a taste before she left again. He wiped the sweat from her temples and kissed her gently, stroking her body as her orgasm subsided.

Hermione reached up, pulled at his collar.

"Is that it?" she asked, raising one brow. "I would have thought you missed me more than that."

“A whole hell of a lot more than that,” Draco replied heavily. She reached down and took him in her other hand.

“I see,” she said, smirking. Gave him a slow tug.

Draco nearly came and bit his lip, struggling to contain himself.

“I didn’t want to do anything you didn’t want me to do,” he gasped. She was swirling her thumb in delicate circles around his tip, giving him a challenging stare. “I don’t want you to regret coming back.”

“I’ll make it clear if you upset me,” she said. “If you’re good and you listen and obey my orders then we won’t have any problems. Now, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but you’re much too timid right now for my liking. Our son is dead and I need comfort, Draco. I need *you*, and I want it as rough as you can give it. Help me forget this pain.”

Draco obeyed gladly, his confidence slowly restoring itself by her words, lowering himself to her once more and smothering her with a fierce kiss that she reciprocated, her hands sliding down his muscled back to grope at his ass.

“Did you miss me at all?” he asked as he trailed his kisses down to her chest, pushing all the fabric that obstructed his touch away. Felt her pounding heart, the dampness on her skin from their combined heat. He licked it up, savoring her taste, kissing her breasts and watched as her nipples puckered.

She didn’t answer at first. Draco held her other breast, kneading it roughly so that she squirmed underneath him, but not in pain.

“Just fuck me,” she said through grit teeth.

Draco took a stiff nipple into his mouth and sucked on it, flicking it with his tongue, stoking the fire inside her. She moaned, pushed her hips up into him, signaling she was ready.

He felt light-headed with lust. That soft, smooth skin-it was heavenly to feel it again. Draco took her left knee in his hand and wrapped that leg around his waist, inching himself closer so that they were flush against one another. His cock pressed lengthwise against her lips and she bit her lip and moaned again, rolled her hips, feeling his cock rub against her.

Draco took himself in one hand and traced her slit with the tip of his cock, leaking precum all over her sensitive flesh. She was still wet and sticky there and it allowed him to push into her easily.

She gasped. It had been so very long. Her belly *swooped*. She bunched her skirt out of the way and opened her legs up more widely to let him sink into her more easily, for although she was so wet she hadn’t had a cock of his size since she’d left him. And maybe had kept it that way on purpose.

Still with only that first inch inside her, Draco paused, looking his wife in the eyes, and took her hands, interlocking their fingers, pressing them down onto the bed on either side of her head.

“Tell me you missed me,” he murmured.

Hermione glared.

“*Fuck me,*” she ordered.

He pushed in further, stretching her as he went. Hermione bit back a whimper. Her hips raised into him, trying to take more than he gave.

“You can’t lie to me, Hermione,” he said, and his voice was gentle but the next push was rough—Hermione exhaled sharply.

“Give it to me,” she panted.

He pushed in the rest of the way, so deep that his balls pressed against her. Hermione shuddered, completely full, and came again, her walls repeatedly squeezing Draco’s cock.

He came with her, unable to hold back, moaning from the sensation, his cock pulsing hard. His wife’s hands were sweaty in his but he kept his grip, leaned down to kiss her thoroughly, their tongues mingling.

He began to thrust and she keened softly, panting as he maintained a hard, relentless pounding, seeking to fulfill the burning need between them.

“We belong to each other,” he said in a rasp, slowing to a crawl, lowering his head to speak into the damp flesh of her throat. He inhaled her scent, dizzy from the rush it gave him. “Don’t we?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, and she let him rearrange her so that she was on all fours with him behind her, his arms wrapped around her middle, his cock plunging into her again and again, driving all thought from her mind.

“I thought I’d never hold you again,” he rasped, his lips dragging against her cheek. “I thought I’d never *feel* this again. *Nngh*. You’re incredible Hermione.”

His hand groped her breast. She pushed back into him, meeting him thrust for thrust, her walls clinging to him. Draco bit into her shoulder carefully and she squeezed him tight. His balls slapped against her sensitive, reddened flesh. Hermione let him push his fingers into her mouth—she bit them and drank at the wounds.

They ended up with Draco sitting against the headboard next and her bouncing in his lap, riding him as hard as she could, with his face buried in her chest, his mouth marking up her skin. His grip spread over her ass, helped stabilize her as she fucked him, and he watched her with pleased, half-open eyes. Her hands were on his chest, her talons digging deep into his flesh until they met bone.

Didn’t you miss me? he asked her again. She was lost to their mating, barely registering his words. He knew he might sound pathetic but didn’t care—a century was a *long* time to go without assurance from his beloved wife. She had to have missed him a *little*, surely.

When she’d grown too tired to continue Draco took the lead again and pushed her onto her back, so that she was folded in half with her legs in the air, and he mounted her and sank into her slowly, watching her eyes roll back into her head as he went deeper and deeper.

“Or is it only this you missed?” he asked softly, before beginning to pound again.

She came two more times, screaming by the last with tears sliding down her face. She was shaking uncontrollably then, a beautiful mess, clinging to him as he came inside her one more

time with a roar, filling her to bursting with his seed.

Mine, he thought, dazed with pleasure. *I love you, little bird.*

He was spent and trembling a little when he finished, and he felt so raw and tired that he collapsed onto the mattress, but managed to roll his wife over and on top of him.

He held her to him as she sobbed, both overwhelmed by pleasure and grief. They were still connected and he was stroking her hair.

"I did miss you," she confessed weakly through her tears. "After everything we did to each other. And I was so mad at myself for it. It doesn't make sense."

At last. Draco could have rejoiced-but instead all he felt was sorrow-or something close to it.

"We're husband and wife," he said. "We've been together for so long. There's no reason to be ashamed for missing your partner. We had a whole life together."

And then, because he couldn't help himself:

"Do you love me?" he asked. "It was all a lie last time, I know, but now... do you?"

Hermione sighed. Her eyelashes tickled his chest.

"I'm used to you," she said simply. "And I think that's why I missed you."

Draco's heart sank. But he understood. And appreciated she had at least not lied.

"Maybe with more time, that will change," she went on. "If ever there comes a day where I can fully move past what you did to me. But no, I don't love you. That's the way it is."

He nodded.

"It's my own fault," he said. "I ruined our chances from the start."

"You did."

"Then you won't stay," he said. Inside, he ached.

"I will," she replied. "I lived the life I wanted. I had my fill for now. Perhaps eventually I'll go back up, see how things are. But I'm in no rush." She traced her talon along his abdominal muscles.

"Maybe I missed being Queen *just* a tiny bit," she said, smirking. "Even if I was faking before—part of me did enjoy it."

Though her earlier confession still stung horribly, Draco chuckled and kissed her forehead.

He could live with the knowledge that she was comfortable with him now, at least. They had a great deal of time indeed to see if her heart could ever truly warm to him. It was good enough that she was here, and that she planned to stay for an indefinite amount of time. He would do things right this time. Would give her every reason to trust him and want him for more than his body. Would serve her however she desired. Even if her heart never relented, it was enough to be together again in some capacity. To know she was safe and well. To know that despite her vengeful arc, she had come back to uphold her vow.

“Then let’s go and see to our guests,” he said with a kiss to her shoulder.

She felt a little unsteady on her feet, and it wasn’t only because of the ravenous fuck she and Draco had just shared.

The last time she’d been in this room, its floor had been covered with bodies, and there’d been debris everywhere. The memories were flooding back of her crowning achievement; the night she still dreamed of in vivid detail with no remorse. She could still hear Draco’s agonized roar trailing behind her as she’d flown to freedom.

There were ghosts everywhere.

Translucent, bluish-green, floating slightly over the floor. All milling aimlessly about the room, some muttering to each other in groups, others paired off, gesturing as they spoke, all their voices echoing around the room.

Hermione, still in her green gown, squashed her fear down.

Draco stepped beside her, raised his hand for her to take. She looked at him and took it, and they walked together into the room and toward the dais.

They might be vengeful spirits. She was prepared to cast them out. But her curiosity compelled her to meet them head on, first. She had murdered them all—if they had anything to say to her, she owed it to them to hear it, at least.

One of the ghosts noticed as they made their way up. Then another, and another, until the entire room was watching them. Hermione stood on the dais, staring back. Draco turned to face her, took a knee and bowed his head.

“My Queen,” he said.

Hermione tipped his chin up, made him look at her. Pure, dark devotion shone in his eyes. There was that madness she knew so well, still lurking there, too. That look scorched every nerve in her body, lent to her confidence and power.

She traced his bottom lip with her thumb.

His eyes fluttered.

“Rule me, my Lady,” he said throatily. “Please.”

Rule us, he continued in her head. *Look at them, sweetling. We’ve been waiting for you.*

Hermione looked at the audience of ghosts. They’d all gone silent and were bowing to her. She stared, slightly uncomprehending.

I don’t understand, she thought to herself. *I killed them all. They should hate me. They must be here to haunt me, if nothing else.*

The warped voice came next, awaking from its slumber to reassure her. Hermione welcomed it like an old friend.

They respect power above all, my Lady, and recognize yours. You created this realm, furious one. A sudden and violent death muddles the mind in the afterlife. They are lost, but they remember their love for you even if they know you felled them. They have chosen you to guide them. Will you take your throne?

Hermione was staring at them all. Draco had risen, and he kissed her hand.

Hermione nodded to him again and he took what used to be her throne. Leaving his former throne, the one dead center on the dais, open for her to claim.

A shiver ran through her. Hermione sat down in the throne, feeling oddly calm. Draco was watching her proudly.

“Rise,” she said to the others, and they did so in tandem.

There were familiar faces in that crowd. She could see Erik, and Crabbe Daphne Greengrass and Nott, among others, and there was that blindfolded group of musicians in the back, still holding their instruments.

“Let there be music,” she called, and they bowed again, smiling, and began to play. “Let this be a happy occasion. We are all together again, and you have your Queen here before you.”

At ease now, the ghosts resumed their mingling and chatter. It felt just like before, when they’d all been alive, only happier. The music was not so heavy this time—it was pleasant and soothing. She saw Martin at the edge of the crowd, older than the others, watching her as though he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. He must have lived much longer than the rest, and he seemed more aware than them. She felt no desire to speak to him, and stared at him until he looked away abruptly.

Good. Let him tremble in her presence now.

She looked around the room and felt comfort. Perhaps she might dance with Draco once this song ended. She knew at the end of the night, or day, or whatever it was, that she wanted to drink from him, see if he tasted any different. She might take a peek into Lucio’s old nursery later, and tell Draco some more about what he had missed from his son’s beautiful life. She might see if she could grow some pansies in the garden in an ode to her best friend, who was the only person Hermione had long ago trusted with the confidence that she intended to go back to the manor one day. She might convince Draco to go to the surface with her and take a walk in a rural french village they had once haunted, and see how many of the locals still knew about the story of the devil and his bride. Had the tale survived the test of time? She wanted to know.

But all that could wait. There was no need to rush. Hermione was strangely glad to be home, and not have to hide her darkest parts anymore.

She watched the crowd below for a moment longer. There were many dancing couples gliding about, leaving a lovely misty blue trail behind them.

At last Hermione realized that George was not there. She scoured the crowd thrice to make certain. That gave her immense peace. Nor were Neville and Luna, not even Pansy, and she was happiest above all to note that Lucio was not there, either.

“How do you feel, my Lady?” her consort Draco asked from beside her. His collar gleamed in the light but he wore it proudly.

She didn’t know how to express it in words. All she could do was smile.

A/N: It’s truly been a magical time writing this dark tale for you all. Thank you all so much for 12 years of engaging with this series. Lil baby Leigh started this at 17 and well I’m 29 now and learned a lot along the way. You’re incredible and I appreciate every last one of you. If it wasn’t for your support and interest in this story I wouldn’t have put so much effort into it. I genuinely feel kind of lost right now that it’s over. I cried a LOT writing these last several chapters and I’m normally not a crier at all. I’ve grown way too attached to this story but that shouldn’t surprise me considering how long it’s been. I’m sad to let this go but happy to work on new stuff both for Dramione and different fandoms. Whether you read my next stuff or don’t I just want to say thank you for letting me be your storyteller.

From this point on I will no longer be posting to this site and will post all new works on Archive of Our Own. You can find me there under this same username. Sweet Sacrifice will continue through there only.

My bio has most of my social media links if you want to see what other things I’ve got going on. Don’t be a stranger!

All these years I’ve been saying that the ending to this would be as dark as the rest of the story, yet I surprised myself with how it came out instead. The way the story has developed throughout the years was unplanned yet I’m happy and proud of it. Are there things I would change? Yes. But it’s time to move on.

There’s a lot of loose ends I probably left behind. I’m fine with that. Not everything needs an answer. I like leaving things open to interpretation. BUT: I think this is the one everyone really wants to know. What were the freaking Horcruxes?

Hermione’s is Harry’s heart in a jar. Remember how Draco alluded to torturing/killing Harry and taking some of his blood? He lied. He took blood AND his heart, and made it into Hermione’s Horcrux.

Draco’s is Hermione’s red dress that she was wearing when Draco married them. Simple as that.

They are both hidden underground (not as deep as the manor) in a secret and heavily protected room underneath where Hogwarts used to be, where it all started.